

# Harry Potter and the Wand of Ariel

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## Chapter One- Emptiness

"It is strange to be known so universally and yet to be so lonely." - Albert Einstein

"Once more, please," Professor McGonagall directed.

Harry sighed audibly as he waved his hand at the teapot. In an instant, it turned into a turtle and he looked at the professor, who was watching him intently, her arms crossed over her chest.

"Yes, Harry, I know it's boring and seems unnecessary, but Professor Dumbledore wanted you to stay at Hogwarts to make sure that your magic was still intact."

"I've been here two weeks and haven't had any problems," he answered, a bit annoyed. He was still agitated with having to stay at Hogwarts by himself and also at Professor McGonagall calling him 'Harry', which seemed entirely new to him. So often, it was "Potter this" and "Potter that" that his mind still stumbled whenever McGonagall called him by his first name.

"That's not entirely true. Both Professor Dumbledore and myself have noticed that something with you is slightly odd." She consulted a parchment briefly and nodded her head, reaffirming her statement.

"But I haven't lost any power, I can still do wandless magic," he nodded towards the turtle that had tucked itself into its shell, "and I haven't any difficulty remembering the spells."

"Yes, I know that, still, I think something happened when You- when Voldemort," she winced as she said his name, "cast that charm on you."

Harry didn't respond and instead stood up, his watch indicating that the session was over.

"Oh, Harry, Professor Dumbledore would like the both of us to meet with him after dinner."

"Alright. Thank you, Professor, see you at dinner."

She nodded at him again and went back to her parchment, now scribbling hastily on the somewhat tattered looking sheet.

Harry stalled a moment, waiting for any further instruction. None came, and he turned from the professor's desk, exiting the classroom.

He trudged through the halls towards the IMS common room. He'd just begun to get used to the empty halls and quiet classrooms of the school. During previous holidays that Harry had spent at the school, there had always been other students and most of the staff stayed on, but over the summer holidays, the castle was deserted. Other than Draco, whom he had not yet seen this summer, he was the only student and as far as he knew, only about five professors remained. It was his first night back in his own room in the two weeks since Hermione had left for the Burrow. Madame Pomfrey had been worried and insisted he stay in the hospital wing until she was confident about his health.

Not surprisingly, the common room was deserted and though Harry had expected it, it was still slightly unnerving. Every sound seemed to echo slightly, from the closing entrance to his footsteps towards his dormitory. He placed his hand on the knob and opened the door slowly, half expecting Hermione to be sitting on the lounge, her head buried in some textbook or another. The room was silent and dark, and he took out his wand. After a few waves, the torches on the walls were burning cheerily, flooding the room with light that quickly burned away the dark shadows and lifted Harry's mood slightly.

He walked to his room, holding his gaze steady on the door, forcing himself not to even look in the direction of Hermione's room. His bed was neatly made and a fire burned in the grate, though he knew at this time of year, it would give off no heat. He walked to his bed and set his wand on the nightstand. He stretched out on his bed, not willing to admit that he was tired. Sighing, he rubbed his hands over his face, realising he should probably shave before dinner. He sat up again and immediately let himself fall back onto his bed. He settled against the pillows, feeling as if a large weight had settled upon his chest. He heard a clinking noise and felt Daryl jump up onto the bed. The small dog jumped onto his chest and licked his face. He smiled as the dog wiggled and jumped on him and he patted her and rubbed her ears until she settled down next to him. Chief Pip was napping at the foot of the bed and Harry wondered who had brought them from the hospital wing. He looked down at Daryl and his mind immediately jumped to Hermione.

The two weeks without her had been lonely and so far he'd only received one letter from her. It had been short, saying only that things were busy at the Burrow with wedding plans and that the Weasleys were well. He'd written to her a few times, but found it increasingly difficult to write letters to her when she wasn't writing back. He closed his eyes as memories of her clouded his thoughts. He thought about kissing her and couldn't chase away the thought that it may have been the last time.

*Why did she leave?* he thought to himself, before chastising himself for it. He understood exactly why she had left. If Hermione was anything, she was loyal. Despite all of the bad between her and Ron, she still considered him a best friend. Harry knew from her letter that the Burrow was in utter chaos. The stress created by the wedding for Mrs. Weasley was no doubt tripled by the death of Arthur. He knew that it was a good thing Hermione had gone to the Burrow, but deep down, he wanted her nowhere except for with him.

The term at school had been both physically and mentally draining. The lack of research projects and various presentations gave Harry more time to think that he would have preferred at that time. For the first time since he had discovered his aunt's secret, he had allowed his mind to reflect on the situation and it had not left behind any pleasant feelings.

Since he was very young, there had been a large part of him that had hoped dearly for a real family, one that cared about him and loved him unconditionally. The Dursleys had never been willing to do that and it wasn't until he'd come to Hogwarts that he had received something remotely close. His friends and the Weasleys had given him a family. He had mourned his parents even more than he had previously when he'd found out the truth surrounding their deaths.

The previous summer had given him hope. Ami seemed very willing to give him what he had never had and for a short time, he actually felt as if he could have a real family. Even after the Fidelius Charm, he began to develop a bond with Ami and it was the reminder of the bond that had helped him out last year. It had taken him nearly a year to realize how upset he was over her having to go into hiding and how, even without physically being there, she had helped him through the year.

Between Ami and Hermione, Harry knew how he had survived the night in the graveyard.

He rolled over, stretching his arms as he moved. He blinked and looked at the clock. Six o'clock. He sat up and looked down at his clothes. Thoroughly rumpled from sleep, he groaned as he stood up. He quickly changed clothes and grabbed his wand from the table, anxious to get to dinner.

In the countless times that Harry had been to the kitchens, he'd never seen them as inactive as they were during the summer holidays. Much to Harry's surprise, most of the teachers left over the holidays and the few that remained lived lives very different from what Harry saw during the school year.

Professors Snape, McGonagall and Dumbledore were all seated around a table. Snape was holding a copy of the Daily Prophet and was reading aloud from an article.

Dumbledore noticed Harry first and Snape stopped abruptly as he too noticed Harry.

"Good evening Harry, how are you feeling today?"

"Better, sir, thank you."

"Wonderful. I was telling Professor McGonagall earlier that I would like to meet with you both tonight to discuss what happened in the graveyard."

Harry nodded as he sat down in the only empty chair, which was next to Professor Snape. Snape barely acknowledged Harry, only slightly nodding before unfolding the paper and reading it again.

As soon as he was seated, a group of house elves scurried forward, depositing plates and dishes onto the table. Harry served himself and began half heartedly eating his shepherd's pie. As he was pushing his food around his place, he heard a small noise from Professor Snape. He looked up to see Snape sneering slightly at the page.

"Severus, is something wrong?" asked Professor McGonagall, a note of concern in her voice.

"Listen to this. 'Due to the current recession in wizarding business, Minister of Magic, Bernard Connolly, announced today that all shops not owned by those of wizarding blood in Diagon Alley will be closed from the first of August through the second of September,'" Snape read aloud from the paper.

Harry knit his eyebrows, finding the announcement to be rather strange. He noted the Professor McGonagall looked stunned and Dumbledore looked adamantly concerned. "Why would they do that?" Harry asked Professor Dumbledore.

"In a wizarding slump, you can't very well have a bunch of mudbloods running the shops in Diagon Alley," came a voice from behind him.

Harry turned and was surprised to see Malfoy standing a few feet away, wearing a very haunted look on his face. Harry saw a shadow near his brow line and knew that this was where he'd been injured in the graveyard a few weeks prior.

"Malfoy!" McGonagall said, anger obvious in her tone.

"My apologies Professor McGonagall for the use of that particular term, but it's the truth. Everyone knows that the most popular shops in the alley, like Quality Quidditch Supplies, are owned by wizards that aren't from old families."

"Be that as it may, I don't see how it is relevant-"

"Minerva. He's right," Snape interjected.

Harry looked between McGonagall, who was wearing a mask of anger, and Snape, who seemed to have recovered from his earlier shock. He wondered to himself what exactly was going on and turned towards Professor Dumbledore, who was also eyeing the two teachers.

"Draco, won't you have a seat?" Dumbledore said as he summoned a chair, "there are a few things in the paper worthy of discussion this evening, perhaps you would like to join us."

Malfoy didn't respond, instead moving towards the chair that Dumbledore had placed directly next to Harry. He didn't look at anyone as he sat down, only moving a bit to allow a house elf to place a plate in front of him.

"Professor Dumbledore, why would Connolly close the shops? Won't that anger a lot of witches and wizards?" asked Harry.

Snape and McGonagall both shifted in their seats. Dumbledore ignored them and looked directly at Harry.

"I'm afraid, Harry, that the wizarding world has gone through a great many changes in the past few months. Connolly has been gathering supporters in favour of tighter restrictions for those not born of purely wizarding blood."

Harry was admittedly very surprised to hear this. He had not read an issue of the Daily Prophet in some time as the work load towards the end of the year had greatly increased. "Does anyone know who he really is yet?"

Snape had been moving a fork full of mashed potatoes towards his mouth and stopped abruptly at Harry's question, raising his eyebrows inquisitively.

"I'm afraid, Harry, that is not possible for us to reveal that at this time. The Ministry is unstable enough as it is right now. We're very unsure of sides," he responded, his voice lowering as he said this. "Things are generally unsure actually. Voldemort has gone quiet in the past two weeks and there have been no reports of Death Eater activity in that time. It's almost as if the entire side has disappeared, with the exception of Connolly."

Harry struggled to wrap his mind around this. Truthfully, he had expected near chaos after the incident in the graveyard. With a charm as powerful as the Veneficus Quies in his arsenal, Harry was shocked to hear that Voldemort had become eerily silent. "What is Connolly up to?"

"Mostly just gathering support for pureblooded wizards. He placed into effect a few 'economic sanctions', such as the closing of the shops in Diagon Alley. There have been other things too. Curfews, trade restrictions, etcetera."

"It sounds like the Holocaust before World War II."

"Indeed," interjected Snape, raising his eyebrows again.

Harry, slightly annoyed, narrowed his eyes at Snape and looked again at Dumbledore.

"He's also made public his anti-Muggle sentiments. The unsettling part is that a great many people in our world are beginning to agree. Families are losing money, the older families have withdrawn their savings from Gringott's, and people are beginning to get restless with the slump in our economy."

Harry nodded. He was mentally processing everything Dumbledore was saying and was a bit anxious to go back to his dorm to write to Hermione. McGonagall continued her questioning of Draco about the shops in Diagon Alley and Harry's mind began to wander.

Dinner was cleared away quickly and the house elves brought dessert. Everyone ate in relative silence. Harry's thoughts had moved to the meeting he would be having with Dumbledore and McGonagall after dinner. He had thought up until this morning's lesson that he was recovering well, but McGonagall had noted that something was still off. He was more than a little worried at what Dumbledore would say. He blocked any thought of no longer being able to continue in IMS, instead focusing on his custard.

Dumbledore cleared his throat after the desert had been taken away. "Harry, Minerva, I believe we have a meeting to attend," he said.

His stomach turned over as he stood from the table, following the two Professors from the kitchen. They walked in silence during the long trek to Dumbledore's office. Harry kept his eyes carefully trained on his shoes the entire walk.

"Ice mice," Dumbledore said softly when they reached the stone gargoyle. After a short moment, it jumped back and the portion of wall behind the statue slid back, revealing the circular staircase. Harry jumped onto the stairs after his teachers, urging the stairs to move a little slower.

The trip went even quicker than usual and in a few moments, they were seated in Dumbledore's office. Fawkes was perched next to the desk, looking at Harry and trilling softly. McGonagall shifted in the seat next to him as he looked around the office, glancing at the snoozing portraits and taking in the strange magical artifacts.

"Harry, how have you been doing in the lessons?" Dumbledore asked suddenly, looking at him over his spectacles.

"Er... quite well, I thought. I'm still able to perform wandless magic and I've been able to handle all of the different tasks that Professor McGonagall has assigned."

Dumbledore gazed at him for a moment before bending his head and looking at the parchment lying on his desk.

"Have you noticed anything different?"

Harry racked his brain, searching for a clue to the right answer. "Well... I think something has been a bit off."

"For example?"

"Erm-I don't have as much control as I did before, I don't think. I can still do everything properly; it's just that there seems to be a bit more force behind the spells than usual."

Dumbledore nodded. "I think, Harry, that what happened in the graveyard changed your magic. We have known for some time that you are exceptionally powerful and it's only been in this past year that your Magus powers have begun manifesting themselves. I've believed for several months now that it was only a matter of time before the powers reached their fullest potential. Under normal circumstances, the powers would grow as you did."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, more really, that you would grow into your powers. There are a great many things that come to a Magus naturally, and I expected that you would eventually gain use of these talents. However, I think that Voldemort pulling the charm out of you caused your powers to grow much faster than they should have. It is my belief that that is why you're having difficulty controlling your magic."

Harry nodded, puzzling over Dumbledore's words. He reminded himself that he would write to Hermione about this as well.

"Have you spoken with Amarante recently, Harry?"

Harry's head snapped up. "No."

"Your aunt has spent the past year working with Rachel to better understand your powers. Rachel is a magical historian and was able to help Amarante learn a great deal. I have arranged for you to meet with both of them once a week until we feel confident in your ability to control the magic."

"Hermione's mum is a magical historian?"

"Yes. I personally believe that she read *Hogwarts: A History* to Hermione when the girl was very young," Dumbledore said, with a hint of amusement in his voice and the familiar twinkle back in his blue eyes.

"That would explain a lot."

"Indeed. You will be meeting with them Wednesday evenings after dinner, if that is agreeable for you."

Harry raised his eyebrow. "That will be fine."

Dumbledore nodded. Harry looked at McGonagall, seeing that she had nothing to add to the discussion. He faced Dumbledore again.

"One last thing, Harry. Have you considered the events of the graveyard?"

"How do you mean sir?"

"I think it is of utmost importance that you find a way to record the events. I believe a Pensieve may be key into greater understanding of the Keys. I have several books on the art of Pensieve crafting, if you're interested."

"I have a book, sir. I'll look through it tonight."

"Very well. You may see either Professor McGonagall or myself for any materials you may need, though I imagine Professor Snape will be much more helpful during the potion brewing process."

Harry nodded again as Dumbledore stood up. McGonagall stood as well, motioning for Harry to follow her from the office. He said goodbye to Dumbledore and followed his head of House. As soon as they had reached the stairwell, she turned to him.

"Are you going to work on the Pensieve, Harry?"

"Yes, Professor McGonagall."

"Very well. What book do you have about Pensieves?"

"I believe it's called '*Clearing Your Thoughts: Instructions on Pensieves*'."

She nodded. "Excellent resource. I must get back to my quarters, Harry. Have a good evening."

"Good night Professor."

She nodded once more and turned down a narrow, dark hallway. Harry continued down towards the Entrance Hall, heading back towards his dorm.

He reached the entrance and gave the password. The door opened and bright light flooded from the common room. Harry blinked and walked cautiously through the door. He saw a blond head over the top of the sofa and groaned inwardly.

"Close the door," came a monotone voice.

Harry rolled his eyes. The door closed automatically and Malfoy knew it.

"Don't be stupid," he replied.

"That's rich, coming from you."

Harry strode to the front of the couch in front of Malfoy. "Do you have a problem?"

"With you? Why would I have a problem with you?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't be asking."

"Did you end up in Gryffindor based on your wits alone?"

Harry raised his eyebrows as the blond boy looked up at him. "Well?"

"Potter, do you have any idea what happened in the graveyard?"

He narrowed his eyes in response as Malfoy stood up to glare at him face to face. "What?" he said, taking the bait.

"I saved your arse, that's what."

Harry had not expected that answer. His eyes widened as he saw a dark fury cross over his schoolmate's eyes. "I-I know."

"Hmph," came the reply. Malfoy picked the book he had been reading off of the lounge and pushed past Harry, heading towards his own dorm. Harry stood rooted to the spot, shaking his head for a moment before moving towards his own room.

The dark lounge room was strangely chilly as Harry turned up the torches. He left a few lit as he crossed towards Hermione's room. He hesitated a moment at her door, feeling odd just walking into her room. Instinct had him reaching up to knock before he shook himself. He



opened the door with a loud creak, the room mostly empty and very dark. He lit a torch next to the door and walked in quietly. The emptiness of the room made him feel very lonely. He quickly walked to Hermione's bookcase, smiling in amusement at the gaping holes where she had removed books to take to the Burrow.

As expected, the books were neatly alphabetized and he soon located the book on Pensieves. He pulled it from the shelf, running his eyes quickly over the other titles. Nothing caught his eye and he grasped the book close to him, blinking out the torch and exiting her dorm.

He crossed to his own room, which was lit and warm. The nights had been surprisingly chilly lately and the house elves had kept a warming fire burning in the grate in the evenings. He tossed the book onto his bed, walking towards his bed. A parchment envelope and a thin, square package were resting on the bed. He picked up the envelope and immediately recognized the handwriting. His heart fluttered as he broke the seal and pulled out the enclosed letter.

*Dear Harry,*

*I hope all is well at Hogwarts. I miss you terribly. I've been thinking about you every day. The mood at the Burrow has shifted dramatically. The sorrow that enveloped the house has diminished in the hustle and bustle of wedding preparations. If everything continues as smoothly, I told Molly that I'd like to come back to Hogwarts a few days early. I told her I'd like to see my parents before the castle is swarmed with wedding guests. I talked to Penelope this afternoon and they are expecting some four hundred guests! The wedding should be beautiful, I'm very excited. Promise me a dance?*

*I'm not sure whether or not Professor Dumbledore has spoken with you. Before I left, he mentioned to me that he wanted to make sure you were able to remember everything that happened with Voldemort in the graveyard. He suggested that you might try a Pensieve. I agree with him, but from the book you gave me for Christmas, I know that they can be very difficult and time consuming to craft. I thought in the meantime, there is another method for remembering. I would have sent this sooner, but I only just today had the opportunity to get down to the village. I hope you'll find this useful, there's something about Muggle notebooks that make them better for diaries than rolls of parchments. I've kept diaries all my years at Hogwarts, it's fun to go back and read them. I know this won't be quite the same, but maybe it will become a habit. Maybe if you kept a diary, you'd better be able to keep your thoughts in order.*

*I thought also that both you and I could use this journal as a sort of record of the information we find on the Keys. I haven't had much chance to do any research yet. You wouldn't believe how mad things have been around here. I miss you and wish you were here. I can't wait to see you. Only a few more weeks.*

*Love from Hermione*

He sighed and sunk to his bed, feeling as if he'd just been hit by the Knight Bus. Running his hands through his hair, he looked at the square package. He tried to take his mind off of missing Hermione and picked up the package. He tore off the brown paper and a familiar book fell into his lap. He picked it up, surprised that Hermione had sent him the journal that they had discovered earlier that year. She practically hadn't let it out of her sight since they'd figured out what it was and was surprise she'd sent it by owl. Then again, Hermione trusted her post owl more than any other. He pulled off the rest of the paper, revealing a shiny, green spiral notebook. It reminded him greatly of the ones Dudley used to take to school. He always ended up with second hand notebooks, as Dudley never used his, opting instead to toss them into some drawer where they yellowed and collected dust.

He flipped open the cover, slightly enjoying the crisp whiteness of the lined pages and the slight scent that came off of the new paper. He smiled to himself as he flipped the pages, feeling a bit like a child at the excitement over the new notebook. Every page was blank and untouched. Tucked inside the spiral binding, he found a blue pen. He picked up both items and moved towards his desk. Setting them down, he picked up a quill and pieces of parchment.

*Dear Hermione,*

*Thank you for the diary, it's perfect. I had a meeting with Dumbledore after dinner tonight. He did suggest that I make a Pensieve. I took the book out of your room, but I haven't had the chance to look through it yet. The two weeks since you left have been pretty uneventful. I've been having daily lessons with McGonagall. She and Dumbledore think that the spell Voldemort used unlocked my Magus powers. I'm going to be working with Ami and your mum for awhile. Did you know that your mum is a magical historian? Maybe I should ask her about the Keys. There are some strange things going on lately. I don't know if you still receive the Daily Prophet, but Dumbledore said there are some things going on relating to the Muggleborns. Dumbledore thinks that you might be in danger, because the Ministry has begun clamping down on people not of pure wizarding blood. If what he says is true... Well, just... be careful. Okay?*

*Harry*

Harry scratched his name quickly on the parchment and blew lightly on the paper, waiting a moment for the ink to dry before folding the parchment and sealing it. He looked towards Hedwig's perch and the snowy owl flew to him, landing and stretching out her leg. Harry tied the letter to her and she nipped his finger before taking off through the open window.

He picked up the journal again and opened it to the first page. Hesitating, he picked up the pen off of his nightstand and scribbled the date on the top line. He held the pen poised over the line, wondering what exactly he should write.

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## Chapter Two--Thoughts

"You live with your thoughts -- so be careful what they are."~ Eva Arrington

A warm orange light filtered into the room as Harry scrawled in his diary. He had spent most of his time over the past three days writing down his experiences. Under Dumbledore's advice, he had started his diary with the first dream and written recounts of the others, plus various bits from the school year. As it was, he was writing about Arabella's description of the Magus.

He set the pen down carefully on the desk as he reread his entry. Satisfied, he looked at his watch and, noting the time, got out of the chair and walked over to the corner table. He peered into the small copper cauldron, looking at the silvery, purple contents simmering slowly. Snape had given him instructions for the contents of his Pensieve and Harry was happy to discover that he could just as easily brew the potion in his room as he could the Potions dungeon.

According to his instructions from Snape, the colour was just right, so he turned down the heat and placed a lid onto the cauldron. It needed to be kept on very, very low heat for nearly twelve hours and he'd risen early to get started on it. His watch told him that he had another two hours before he needed to remove it. He closed the notebook and turned down the lights in his room. It was time for his lesson with Ami and Rachel.

He wondered to himself what was taking Hermione so long to respond to his letters. He'd sent the letter about the Daily Prophet three days earlier and he still had not heard a reply. He shrugged off his worries and tried to block the reoccurring daydreams of Hermione and Ron getting back together. Before he knew it, he was standing in front of the classroom where Dumbledore had instructed him to meet with Ami and Rachel. He heard laughter as he drew nearer to the door and paused.

The two women were perched in desks facing each other and carrying on about some story or another. Rachel was clutching her stomach and chuckling as Ami relayed a tale, using lots of animated hand gestures. Harry stepped into the doorframe and cleared his throat. The two women stopped their carrying on and turned to look at him, both smiling.

"Hiya Harry!" Ami said brightly, motioning for him to join them.

"Evening Harry, how's the potion brewing?" Rachel asked, grinning.

"It's moving along pretty well. It's simmering now; I have to check it in about two hours."

"Well then, we better get started," Rachel replied.

Ami shifted her desk so that Harry could sit with them. She smiled at him once more as they sat.

“I suppose the first thing we should talk about is what exactly a Magus is. Do you know much about it?” Rachel said, getting right to business.

“Only what Arabella told me. She didn’t seem to know much about it. Actually, Arabella said that I came into full power last summer...” he trailed off, his confusion growing as he rethought what Arabella had told him earlier in the year.

“Arabella really knows very little about it. And that’s more than what most people know. The theory of the Magus is so ancient and magiscience has basically concluded that it was impossible for another Magus to ever appear.”

“What do you mean? Arabella explained a legend-“

“It’s not a legend. How much do you know about magical history Harry?”

He shrugged. “What we learned in History of Magic. About the goblin rebellions, a little about the founding of Hogwarts, some about Magus...”

“Ah, so very little. I should start at the beginning I suppose. It begins really with a legend and sort of morphs into history. Similar to Muggle history, but older. As the legend goes, back and back through time, its believed that everyone had magic in them. Which is most likely very true, as magic is based hugely on willpower.”

“So, how did everyone have magic?” Harry asked.

She shrugged slightly. “As I said, it’s based largely on willpower. Everyone, wizard, witch, Muggle, knew about magic. Everyone could at least perform a tiny bit. However, there was a group, called the Magi that had magical genes. They could perform magic on the simplest whim, use incredible talents like mind reading, and spoke their own language, which you know of. Mage is a very interesting language, I’ll go into that later.”

“If everyone used to be magic, how did that change?”

“The Magi were a very elite group, friendly and kind, but aloof from the rest of the human population. A Magus would never think to marry outside of the class. The story goes that Tristram-“

“Tristram?”

Rachel nodded. “Yes, I believe you know about him?”

“I’ve met him.”

“*Met* him? Why, surely, that’s impossible! Tristram disappeared nearly a millennium ago.”

Harry began the lengthy explanation offered to him by Tristram on the afternoon of the graveyard. Ami and Rachel listened intently and a quarter of the way through Harry’s tale, Rachel conjured a quill and parchment and began scratching down notes. Harry continued on to the scene in the graveyard and a look of terror washed over Ami’s face. Rachel had grown

ashen and set down her quill, no longer taking notes. Both ladies listened intently as he outlined the small battle and how Draco had ended up saving them. Ami nodded at this, looking slightly relieved.

When he had finished, the room become oddly silent. They all looked at each other for a long moment before Rachel cleared her throat and looked down on at her notes. A lengthy pause followed.

“Harry, I’m going to have to match this information together and make sure we’re on the same page. If what you say is true...”

Harry just nodded, unsure of exactly what she meant.

“I’ll have to continue the discussion on magical history at a later date, once I do a bit of research. I’d still like to go over some of the Magus abilities with you though.”

“What sort of abilities?”

“There’s a vast range really. In fact, I suspect that what we even know about Magus abilities is not all encompassing. There are great healing powers; if you were injured, you could heal yourself without wand or spell. The ability to become an Animagus without much training, telepathy, power over languages, invisibility, ability to time travel-“

“Time travel?”

“Of course. I don’t know much about that. I have some books on Magus legend if you’d like.”

“That would be wonderful.”

She nodded and scratched something on the piece of parchment in front of her. “The books would probably explain all this better than I. The real point of these lessons is to work with you and develop the talents you’re showing naturally. Obviously, we can pass over any sort of Animagus lessons and Ami would like to work with you on languages. How many are you fluent in?”

“Seven. Well, six, but I know enough Finnish to get by,” Ami answered.

Harry gave his aunt a lopsided smile and looked at Rachel again. “Do you speak any languages?”

She nodded. “French, Italian and German. Latin as well.”

“Did you teach Hermione to speak any languages?”

“She is well versed in Latin, I suspect it has helped her a great deal in her studies, as was the point of it. She knows French as well.”

“Dumbledore said that you’re a magical historian.”

“Indeed. I studied at a school in Italy, learning from some of the greatest historians of our time. I met Rick in school and we were married shortly after college. I knew your parents quite well, they were both two years behind me here at Hogwarts and I worked closely with them when they became Prefects. I was a Prefect as well, though in Ravenclaw, and was Head Girl.”

“How did you meet?” Harry asked, looking at both his aunt and Rachel.

“Through your mum,” Ami said quietly.

“Oh. Mione and I found a picture of all of you at some party. She was very excited about it.” Harry couldn’t be sure if their matching smiles came from the mention of the picture or of nickname for Hermione.

“Mmm...yes. I believe it was two years before-rather, it was right before your mum was pregnant with you. That would have been right before Rick and I left the wizarding world.” Her voice was becoming softer and had a tinge of sadness to it. “Actually, Ami left shortly after we did, didn’t you?”

“Yes. I believe my disappearance was just a few months after yours. It’s strange, after all these years, the events of those few months are sort of blurry. Everything happened so fast.”

Both witches look deeply saddened and Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He peeked at his watch quickly.

“It’s nearly time for me to leave, I need to get back to my dorm. Same time next week?” he asked, giving them a small smile.

Ami collected herself first, shaking her head slightly. “Of course! It was good to see you Harry. Come visit us. It’s gets dreadfully boring sitting around the castle all day.”

“Yes, yes. I’ll bring those books around sometime tomorrow. If you speak with Hermione, send her my love. And her father’s.”

“I will. Thanks for your help.”

They stood when he did and walked with him part of the way back to the entrance hall. He waved as they ducked down a stone corridor and walked the rest of the way back to his dorm alone. As was the usual, he was rather pensive. He checked his watch once more and quickened his pace.

By the time he had settled into his room, the Pensieve potion was ready. He turned the heat off completely and waved his hand gently over the cauldron, stirring the contents slowly. The purple liquid has gained a sort of transparent quality, though Harry could not see the bottom of his cauldron. He picked up the book that had been lying on his desk and opened it to his marked page.

*Following the brewing of the Pensieve contents, it is necessary to use the proper spell for using the potion with the actual Pensieve basin.*

The passage continued, naming off certain condition that must be met for crafting. He read and reread the instructions until his vision blurred. Realizing he was exhausted, Harry looked at Snape's instructions for storage of the potion and quickly went about putting his things away. It didn't take him long to clean up and get ready for bed and he was soon lying against the down pillows, his eyelids heavy and his mind beginning to slip off into darkness.

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Harry looked at the stack of heavy, leather bound books on his desk. Rachel had dropped off the volumes fifteen minutes prior, making a passing comment about some light reading before dashing off to work on an assignment for Dumbledore. Part of him was anxious to read through them, to discover more about himself, but a large side of him longed to be outside, enjoying the summer weather. He turned in his chair towards the corner of his room.

The Firebolt was perched in the corner, beckoning to him. He looked guiltily again at the books. He knew Hermione would have insisted that he read the books. *Hermione isn't here*, he thought to himself. The choice was obvious and he was across the room in an instant. He had grabbed the broom and reached for the door handle when he heard a soft fluttering near the window. A medium, tawny coloured owl was perched on his windowsill. Harry's heart leapt into his throat as he recognized the bird.

It was clutching a letter and flew off once Harry had untied it. He quickly broke the wax seal on the parchment envelope, nearly tearing the parchment in his haste to get it open.

*Harry,*

*I can't believe that they would ever try to impose sanctions on muggleborns like that! Does no one learn from history? Not to mention that the closing of several shops, muggleborn owned and operated or not, will be horrendous for the economy, which is in terrible shape as it is! Truthfully, I'm not that worried for my own wellbeing, but think of the others from school that are muggleborns. Isn't it obvious to the wizarding population that something dark and sinister is behind this?*

*It's strange to be in a wizarding household while all of this happening. With Dumbledore in charge of Hogwarts, there will always be a safe place for muggleborns, so it really doesn't worry me. However, there is a sense of general indifference here. I know with everything else going on, the wellbeing of a bunch of strangers isn't that much of a concern, but really, no one here seems to care either way. I wonder if this is the reaction of most others. I've written to Dumbledore but haven't heard back from him yet.*

*On another note, I'm anxious to come back to school. I had originally planned on coming home much sooner, but Mrs Weasley has asked me to help with some things around here. I feel somewhat obligated to stay, as she has done so much for me over the years, but I really want to be there. I miss you terribly. I will be back a few days before the wedding and Ron will be arriving shortly after me. He misses you too.*

*Write soon. I know I haven't been the best about keeping up with your letters, but it's wonderful to hear from you. I can't wait to see you.*

*Love from Hermione*

Harry smiled to himself as he reread the letter. The opening paragraph was even written angrily. The handwriting was forced and sharper, and there were a few ink splotches on the page. He could imagine Hermione's reaction to his letter and picture her angrily scratching this letter onto a piece of parchment. As terrible as the situation was, he couldn't help but grin at the thought of Hermione's irritation.

He set the letter down on his desk and looked back at the broom. For some reason, the urge to take a flight around the grounds had left him. He grabbed the first book from the stack and carried it out into the lounge. Sprawling on the sofa, he opened the book to the first page and began reading.

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He stared into the blackness above him, the ceiling in the room far too high to be seen in the dark. He turned his head to the side, searching the nightstand for the clock. He reached his hand out, brushing over the objects on the small table. His fingers found the cold metal outline of his glasses and he picked them, placing them on his face so that he could read the clock. Three forty eight. He sighed with resignation and pushed the duvet cover off. His feet hit the cool stone floor and he shivered slightly. He slid off the bed and walked towards his wardrobe.

Fifteen minutes later he was walking through the entrance hall. After dressing and casting a silence spell over himself and Daryl, he had donned the invisibility cloak and made for the common room, leaving a very angry Chief Pip in his dorm.

They meandered through the halls at a snail's pace, Harry stopping occasionally to look at a painting or to decide their route. He found himself in a narrow, moonlit corridor. The tall windows looked out over the Forbidden Forest and Harry stopped to look. The brilliant silver moon shone brightly on the dew topped trees and he could see a light wind ruffling the branches. Occasionally, some winged creature would flutter across the view and he would watch its flight until it disappeared. Daryl tugged slightly at her lead after some time and he allowed her to lead him further down the corridor.

They came to a staircase and Harry pulled out his wand, lighting their way down the dark stairs. The staircase was long and bending, the darkness enveloping them as the light from the moonlit hall above faded. His steps were quiet and careful, the light from his wand not enough to accurately brighten the increasing darkness. After what seemed like fifty steps, the ground flattened out and Harry found himself in a very dimly lit, very narrow hall. He walked slowly, unsure of where he was.

Suddenly, he slammed into something. He stumbled and lost his balance, slipping backwards as the Invisibility Cloak slid off. He heard a low whisper and was surprised to see Draco Malfoy appear in front of him.



“Potter.” His voice was cold, matching his grey eyes for every degree of ice.

“What are you doing here?” Harry implored, still sprawled on the ground.

“I could ask you the same question.” Malfoy raised his eyebrow.

“I couldn’t sleep, I was-Hey! I don’t have to answer to you!”

Draco rolled his eyes as he nudged the cloak with the toe of his shoe. “An Invisibility Cloak, I see. I should have figured.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably, remembering third year when he and Ron had played a joke on Malfoy. He didn’t answer and just looked at the other boy.

Those cold eyes cut right through him, leaving Harry feeling challenged. He stared back, hoping he looked half as testy as the boy glaring down at him. Without breaking the eye contact, Harry pushed himself off of the floor, brushing off his trousers. As soon as they were face to face, Harry timidly opened his mouth to speak.

“What?”

More glaring.

Growing a little braver, Harry straightened himself out. “Are you going to say something or just stand there and glare?”

Draco just narrowed his eyes into slits and set his jaw before edging past Harry and continued up the stairs, leaving him to wonder at the odd exchange. He shook his head slightly and with a shrug of his shoulders, was off and moving away from the staircase that Malfoy was currently ascending.

He folded the Invisibility Cloak under his arm, feeling as if it was now useless, his private counsel disturbed. Daryl trotted along happily next to him, stopping to sniff at a corner or a spot on the floor.

As he walked through the eerily quiet castle, heading back towards his room, Harry’s thoughts turned to Hermione once again. He sighed inwardly, letting the longing he had been denying wash over him. He missed her. He sunk down against the stone wall, resting his head back against it. Daryl snuggled next to him as his mind flooded with thoughts of everything over the past month. He recalled his journal entries, so full of detail, and yet lacking any subjective view. He thought of Arthur Weasley and the countless muggleborns being hurt by recent events. And he suddenly found himself overwhelmed.

He didn’t know how long he sat in the corridor, his head reeling with guilt and angst, but when he finally looked up, he saw a soft orange light beginning to filter in through the windows. Rising from the ground, he picked up Daryl, who had long since fallen asleep, and trudged slowly back towards his dorm.

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He stared at the empty page in the notebook. He had finished the journaling of events, yet he felt his work was incomplete. He held the pen poised over the first line, his hand shaking ever so slightly. He sighed audibly and dropped the pen onto the desk. Raking his hands through his hair, he thought of the letter from Hermione. Why wasn't she coming back yet? Everything was fine at the Weasleys'. His mind reeled and he tried to cap his frustrations.

He glanced at his surroundings, feeling as if the walls were closing in on him. Abruptly, he skidded back his chair, nearly knocking it over, and in two long strides, he was at the door. He grabbed Daryl's lead from the hook near the door and whistled for her. She jumped from the bed and was swiftly at his heels, with Pip right behind her. After fastening the lead, he yanked open his door and strode out of the common room. His steps echoed loudly in the vast entrance hall and within a few short minutes, he was out of the castle, out into the bright, sunny day.

He stopped just outside the door to unfasten the lead from Daryl's collar. The small dog was clamouring to run free, but he held her for a moment, taking in a deep, calming breath. He started out across the lawn, heading for the lake. Daryl and Pip were scampering ahead, revelling in the summer sunshine. Harry made his way slowly across the green grass, taking in the cool breeze and the summery scents it brought. He closed his eyes, enjoying the warmth on his face.

After a bit, he reached the edge of the lake and settled himself in the grass. Daryl and Pip were frolicking about some ten yards away. He sighed again and leaned back to rest his tired eyes.

Harry laid in the sun for a good half hour, basking in the warmth and light that was a refreshing break from the bleak, stone castle. His mind had turned to happier thoughts and memories. With a pang, he remembered Christmas Day and the kiss he had shared with Hermione. Feelings of elation and deep sadness welled inside him and he once again felt himself spiralling into feelings of loneliness.

A sharp bark pulled him from his reflections. He opened his eyes, blinking against the white light and turned to where Daryl and Pip were. The dog and the bear were standing closer to him, facing towards the gates of Hogwarts on the other side of the lake. Harry watched as they creaked open and a single, black, horseless carriage slowly made its way up the lane to Hogwarts. Curiously, he got to his feet, brushing his trousers off as he began the walk back towards the castle. He wondered who could be in the carriage, as it would be a few weeks before any wedding guests or professors would be arriving.

He was within distance of the carriage as it shuttered to a stop. A few short moments after it had halted, the door flung open and a head emerged from the shadowed depths.

His heart stopped.

In an instant, she had completely stepped from the carriage and was in his arms. He pulled her tight against him and she snaked her arms around his neck. He pulled back slightly from their embrace to look into her eyes.

Toffee brown and reflective of every emotion tearing through him, her eyes pierced him, sending a river of emotion flooding through him.

The mood shifted dramatically. He pulled her face words him, beading his head down. Their lips collided and he felt her stumble slightly. He nearly stumbled himself, riding out the wave of urgency surging through him. Her hands were in his hair, running across his neck, playing down his back, grasping at his arms. His hands moved from her face, combing through her hair, roaming over her, feeling every curve of her torso, resting lightly on her hips for a moment before beginning their travels up towards her neck, finding themselves once more on her face.

She moaned against his lips and he parted them almost immediately. Hers did the same and she moaned softly again. Their kiss deepened as every thought vanished through Harry's conscience as he explored her mouth. He felt as if he was falling and his mind began to spin. His heart jumped to his throat and the falling stopped abruptly. His mind cleared and his sense sharpened.

He heard the clattering of the horseless carriage moving away and the scuffles of the animals; cat, dog, and teddy bear once more reunited. The cool breeze played through her curls and ruffled the hair hanging on his forehead. The sweet scents of summer wildflowers tickled his nostrils. He did not move.

Their lips separated, and he took a step back from her, catching her gaze once more. Her eyes were roaming over his face and he knew he did the same. He desperately worked, memorizing every line of her face, imprinting the image of her visage on his soul, his heart never wanting to forget every detail of this moment. His hands were on her face once more, wiping away the few tears that had begun to slide down her sun kissed cheeks with the pads of his thumbs. He leaned down and kissed her once more, softly, quickly.

She pulled back and their stares locked once more.

"I've missed you."

He grinned at her. "What are you doing here? I thought you weren't coming back for awhile."

It was her turn to grin. "Two reasons. The first being that I missed you horribly."

He hugged her again. "I'm so glad you're back. I was worried sick about you."

"So was Dumbledore. That's the second reason." She hugged him back.

They each pulled back and looked at each other again, wearing identical grins.

"Let's take your things inside." Harry picked up one of the suitcases that had been left when the carriage had pulled away and Hermione grabbed her owl's cage. They linked hands and walked into the school, not taking their eyes off each other.

Later on, after Hermione had settled back into her room, they walked down towards the kitchen for lunch. When they were seated on the table, Harry looked at Hermione. He opened his mouth to speak...

"Not now Harry."

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## Chapter Three--Secrets

**"It is wise to disclose what cannot be concealed." ~ Johann Friedrich Von Schiller**

Harry grinned at Hermione as they settled onto the couch, having greatly enjoyed spending the day with her, despite her obvious avoidance of any serious discussion.

After lunch, they had taken a walk into Hogsmeade and spent the afternoon browsing in the shops. After a couple of hours, they had gone into the Three Broomsticks and bought enough butterbeer for an army. Harry had put his wandless magic and control to the test by floating the packages containing their purchases along in front of them. He'd explained to Hermione in great detail his lessons with McGonagall. By the time they had reached the gates, she had taken their packages from his control and was instead having him try various spells.

"Don't you think this is a bit unnecessary?"

"Of course not. Try a summoning spell."

"Hermione. What exactly are you trying to prove?"

"I'm not trying to prove anything. I'm merely seeing for myself and trying to understand what Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore are talking about."

He rolled his eyes at this. "What do you want me to summon then?"

"I don't know. Erm, how about that stone?"

He summoned the small stone she had pointed at and with a wave of his hand, sent it towards her. She moved to catch it and nearly lost the balance of their things. Harry waved his other hand and caught them mid-fall. He looked at her, a slight smile playing over his lips as he raised his eyebrow at her.

"Alright, alright. I get your point," she replied, grinning and sliding her hand into his. They walked up the lane leading towards the entrance, chatting happily. As they moved closer, the door to the castle was flung open and Rachel Granger hurried out the door to meet them.

"Hermione! I'm so glad you're back!" she cried, pulling her daughter into a tight embrace.

"Oh, Mum, it's so good to see you," Hermione replied, returning her mother's hug.

"Harry, your aunt is waiting for you in the Entrance Hall; you don't mind if I borrow Hermione for a bit, do you?"

"Of course not." He smiled at the pair, who had their arms looped around each other and were both beaming. "I'll see you at dinner, Hermione."

"Bye," she answered as they turned and walked down towards the lake.

Harry watched them for a moment before turning and walking into the castle. Ami was waiting just inside and smiled merrily at him.

“Did you two buy enough butterbeer?” she enquired, raising her eyebrows as she peeked through the various packages.

“I sure hope so. We need it to last for a good portion of the school year.”

“Indeed. Well, then, I suppose we ought to put it away.” She picked two of the packages out of the air and began moving towards IMS. Harry followed, glad to have the load lessened even just a little. They walked into the dormitory and Harry couldn’t help but smile to himself. In the few hours that Hermione had been back, she’d already livened up the dormitory. There were books stacked on the table, a few rolls of parchment on the countertop, a few robes tossed onto the lounge and her owl’s perch in the corner of the room.

After they had put all of the butterbeer away (Ami laughing the whole time), they walked out of the room and headed back towards the main part of the castle.

“Are you glad to have Hermione home?”

He nodded. “It was sort of lonely.”

“I know. I wish we could have spent more time together this summer, but you wouldn’t believe the missions Dumbledore has sent us on. Outside of Hogwarts, we’re completely invisible and it’s a huge asset. No cloaks or charms needed.”

“What sort of missions?”

Ami shrugged. “Information retrieval. Even a bit of spying. Though Sirius and Remus tend to do that more.”

“Sirius and Remus? How are they spying? Shouldn’t they be staying in the castle?”

“Not really. Dumbledore has done his best to insure their safety and as long as they aren’t worried, I can’t be worried.”

“I suppose.”

“Rachel and I were both so relieved when Dumbledore asked us to work with you. It’s a nice change of pace to be back at the castle. And Rachel is just tickled that Hermione is back. I think she was a bit irked at her for staying away so long.”

“She wasn’t the only one.”

Ami grinned knowingly at him. “So is there still nothing going on between you two then?”

Harry turned his gaze towards his aunt and paused a moment, trying to word his response properly. “I suppose that there is nothing official going on between Hermione and me.”

“Ah. Nothing official,” Ami said, the smile evident even in her tone of voice.

“So, you speak six languages?”

Ami let out a laugh that echoed softly in the cavernous hallway they were currently strolling through. “Oh Harry, you’re a real treat,” she said as she shook her head, “Yes, I speak six languages. I look forward to teaching them to you. Languages are a very special tool. The gift of being able to master a language is a far greater thing than any commonplace magic. The gift of word is something to be prized by humans and to know how to express your words in several forms is an ever greater prize.”

“Are spells cast differently in other languages?”

“It really depends on the base of the language. The Latin based languages, as well as English, all use Latin roots for incantations. Germans use a very archaic form of German. Obviously, Middle Eastern countries use an Arabic base and it depends on the country in Asia. It can be very confusing to perform spells from other countries.”

“But I thought it was all based on will? That it didn’t really matter about the incantation?”

“That’s basically true. Spells are a bit more complex than that, at least the ones you’re going to be learning now. I think you’ll find this school year to be really fascinating. Arabella has asked for my assistance on some things. You’ll be practicing Dark Arts this year.”

“Practicing?” Harry asked, incredulous.

“Yes, Arabella and Dumbledore have decided that it is necessary for you to learn some of the basic Dark Arts. It will be a great weapon for you to understand how they work, which plays into the second part of what you’ll be studying this year.”

“What’s that? Cursing friends and family?”

“Oh, Harry, really,” she answered, rolling her eyes. “It’s not like Arabella is going to be teaching you how to cast Avada Kedavra on squirrels, you’ll be learning the actual Dark Arts instead of how to just defend against them.”

“That hardly seems safe. What with a known Death Eater among us.”

“Ah, and who would that be?”

“Malfoy,” Harry spat out.

“I see. Draco Malfoy. He’s an interesting case. Raised by a father who is so immersed in the Dark Arts that actually using a Light spell would cause his tongue to fall out of his mouth, but tempered by a mother with a conscience.”

“How did Lucius and Narcissa end up together?”

“I’m not sure. Narcissa never really divulged that tale of woe to me. I think it has something to do with her father, who longed to be a Dark wizard, but didn’t possess the skill.”

“And Narcissa and Snape?”

“I’ll tell you when you’re older.”

“I’m nearly 16!”

“That you are. You should be at least 50 before hearing that story.”

Harry gave her an exasperated look and she laughed at him again.

“Go on, Harry, ask me another question. I’m having fun.”

“Arabella said there’s a curse on Malfoy’s family.”

“There is. The Malfoys liked to pretend that they were directly descended from Salazar Slytherin. The actual descendents got angry with them, as they were a less, how shall I say this... well off? family, and the name Slytherin was their only claim to fame. About two hundred years ago, the matriarch of the family cast a curse over Lucius Malfoy’s great, great, great grandfather. Ever since that time, their family line has been marred. By all rights, Draco should most likely be a full Magus, but because of the curse, he’s only half. That’s why he can’t become an Animagus.”

“But Hermione can. And I wouldn’t be surprised if she doesn’t have some of the other Magus powers as well. Can she have the Magus powers?”

“Some, if not all, but not to the same degree as you. For example, because of your Magus abilities, you could potentially master over a hundred different languages. Hermione could maybe grasp between five and ten. I’ve learned six through lessons and living in those cultures. Harry, you could read an ancient language and not ever speak it for ten years, and if for whatever reason, you actually had to speak it, you would know it and be able to pronounce it perfectly.”

“I think Hermione is beginning to develop that telepathy thing you and Rachel were talking about.”

“I don’t doubt it. That particular power manifests itself in females much quicker. It’s a girl thing,” she said lightly, winking at him.

Harry rolled his eyes again. “That’s exactly what I need, Hermione reading my thoughts.”

“Hmmm...the way I see it, you shouldn’t be having any thoughts that you wouldn’t want Hermione reading.” She smirked at him, though it was a teasing smirk, not the awful, angry ones that he was used to.

He smiled at her and for one of the few times since the end of fifth year, he was happy. He had been thrilled to have Hermione back and the conversation with his aunt made him feel

comfortable around her. He was beginning to think that it would be very nice to have someone like Aunt Ami in his life.

“Would you look at the time, Harry! It’s nearly time for dinner. Are you going to bring some of that butterbeer?”

“Nah, I think the house elves will have something.”

“Gillywater, most likely, at least if Minerva has anything to say about it.” She winked again. “I’m going to stop by my quarters for a few minutes before dinner. I’ll see you in the kitchen.”

“See you.” He waved as his aunt turned down an adjacent corridor. He continued walking towards the kitchens, finding the large still life and tickling the pear in a few short minutes.

Loud chattering greeted his ears as soon as the painting closed behind him. Going a little farther into the kitchen, he saw Hermione, Rachel and Professor McGonagall sitting around the table. Hermione was describing in great detail the plans for the wedding and the other two women were both smiling, though Professor McGonagall’s smile was much more contained than Rachel’s beaming grin.

“Oh, they have the most beautiful flowers for the ceremony! Penelope was showing me pictures of the different arrangements. Great white roses, intertwined with some other flower, a very pale pink one--”

“Hibiscus?” Rachel interrupted

“No, I think they just are smaller roses. They look different though, more like garden roses than long stem.”

“Oh, they sound beautiful.”

“They are. The wedding is going to be amazing, like something out of a fairy tale. I’m so excited for it.”

Harry cleared his throat as he made a bit of a production walking towards the table. He’d only been in the room a few moments and already talk of the wedding was beginning to bore him. The three people seated at the table all smiled at him in greeting and he noticed that Hermione seemed to be blushing slightly.

“Good evening.”

“Allo, Harry. We were just discussing the wedding,” Rachel said.

“I overheard. Are the Weasleys all excited?”

The sudden change in temperament was tangible.



“They’re pleased that Percy and Penelope are getting married, yes, but the air in the house is still rather solemn.” Hermione seemed to be concentrating on her hands as she said this and Harry felt a tinge of guilt at being hurt by her leaving. He was getting anxious to talk to her after dinner.

The awkward silence was broken by more familiar voices entering the kitchens. Dumbledore, Snape, Ami, Arabella, Sirius and Remus walked into the room. Joyous greetings were spread around as everyone sat down at the table. Harry was pulled into a fierce hug by Sirius, and though it was quick, he was surprised by the display of affection. He noticed that Sirius once again looked pale and slightly worn, unlike the last time that Harry had really had a good look at him. Remus didn’t look much better either, and Harry began to worry about the missions that Ami had been talking about earlier.

Everyone at the table began conversing at once. Harry couldn’t help but laugh as the familiar faces moved around him, mouths chatting happily and laughs ringing out in the large kitchen...

They all heard the portrait slam again and quick footsteps moved towards them. Harry turned around and nearly came face to face with none other than Narcissa Malfoy.

“Good evening everyone, sorry I’m late. I got held up at home.” She looked at Dumbledore for a moment, who merely nodded and motioned for her to take a seat. She did so, opting to sit right next to Harry. She looked at him, offering a polite smile, before turning to talk to Snape.

The conversation started up again and Harry soon found himself talking to Remus and Sirius about the Quidditch finals coming up.

“I think that the Catapults have got a real shot at it this year. The Cannons play like they have something to prove, and it’s going to cause a real problem come the final round, if they make it that far,” Sirius was saying between sips from his goblet.

“The Cannons have got something to prove.” Hermione spoke up over the general din of conversation. “Everyone thinks that their glory days are over and they’ve finally got a chance at proving them all wrong.”

“Yes, but if they play like that, they’re sure to lose. They should play to play, not to prove anything.”

“But it’s the need to show everyone what they’re made of that’s gotten them this far. Since Wood was traded, they’ve regained a spirit that everyone except their most devoted fans thought was long dead.”

The table had quieted and the diners were now listening to the ongoing conversation between Sirius and Hermione. Harry listened as Hermione ticked off points about how the Cannons had improved. She spoke animatedly and he was shocked to hear her using proper terminology. He shook his head as she gave a play-by-play recount of a match a few weeks ago. Was this his Mione? The girl who studied during the school Quidditch matches?

Hermione finished her diatribe and looked pointedly at Sirius, who had his eyebrows raised in amazement. The silence in the room was deafening and Harry found that he was beginning to squirm slightly, anticipating who would talk next.

Much to his surprise, the first noise to break the silence did not come from either Hermione or Sirius, but rather from right behind Harry.

He once again heard more footsteps and turned to see Malfoy moving silently towards the ever expanding table.

He caught sight of his mother and stopped dead in his tracks.

“Ah, Mr. Malfoy, so glad you could join us. Won’t you have a seat?” Dumbledore said after a long pause. He looked between Draco, who looked a cross between ashamed and furious, and Narcissa, who looked suddenly as if she very much wanted to cry.

Without a word to anyone, Draco sat and house elves once more brought him his dinner.

Needless to say, the meal was much quieter and there was a tense air to the room. Everyone was mostly silent as they finished their meals.

After they finished their meals, Dumbledore rose up from his chair, clearing his throat as he did so.

“This evening at ten o’clock, there will be a meeting of the Order. Harry, Hermione, I would very much appreciate it if you would attend. Draco, you are welcome also.” Draco gave Dumbledore a stony look as his answer, to which Dumbledore only nodded. He looked at Harry and Hermione, eyebrows raised. They both nodded.

“Very well.” There was no jovial sentiment or odd ramble to his statement. He nodded to each side of the table in turn and quickly left the kitchen soon after.

As if on cue, everyone else did the same thing. Harry walked around the table to meet Hermione and they made for the portrait, now both suddenly very anxious to talk.

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Harry settled himself in the corner of the sofa, stretching his legs onto the table. Hermione was washing up, leaving him to ponder exactly what he wanted to say to her.

Her dormitory door creaked open and she walked into the room, looking refreshed and slightly nervous. She smiled at him, not quite letting it reach her eyes. She settled on a chair, keeping her distance from him and appearing to be sitting very much on the edge of her seat, ready to jump at a moment’s notice. She opened her mouth, looked at him and closed it again, knitting her eyebrows as she did so.

“Harry?”

“Hermione.”

“I-“ she paused again and bit her lower lip.

He watched her for a moment before laughing and standing up. Her eyes widened as he walked towards her. He stood directly in front of her and offered his hand.

“Come talk to me Hermione. It’s just a conversation, not a standoff.” He smiled at her then and she visibly relaxed as he did so. Taking his hand, she allowed herself to be pulled towards the couch.

He sat back into his previous position and she stretched out next to him, resting her head against his chest.

“I’m sorry. I guess I’m sort of nervous.”

“About what?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve had a few weeks to think this all over and I had this whole bit planned out.”

“What were you going to say?”

“It doesn’t matter. When I saw you, it all dissolved into meaningless drivel.”

“Is there such a thing as meaningful drivel?”

“I doubt it.”

“Didn’t think so. Do you mind if I start?” he asked, becoming serious and looking at her.

“Of course not.”

“Good. I’ve spent the last few weeks alone,” he started, watching her cringe slightly, “and I’ve had plenty of time to think all this through. But the first thing I want to ask you is, why did you leave?”

She sighed against him before pulling herself up and turning to face him.

“Arthur died Harry.”

He looked at her with very wide eyes. “Hermione! I know that!” he said, exasperated.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I know you know that. I’m just trying to make a point. Arthur died and I was trying to do what I thought was right. One of my best friends needed me. Mrs. Weasley has done so much for me, for *us*, over the years and I went there because I thought I could help them out.”

“But Hermione, I needed you. And Ron has his whole family, that whole huge support system.”

The look in her eyes made him wish he had kept his mouth shut.

“That’s not fair. I can’t choose between the two of you. Especially after the fact.”

“You did choose, Hermione. You chose Ron.”

“Harry! I can’t believe that! You’re asking me to justify why I went to my best friend’s house after his father died. I can’t believe that I’d have to do that and to be honest, I don’t even think I should give you the satisfaction of a response. I shouldn’t have to justify anything to you.” She stared at him and held her hands on her hips, having jumped off of the sofa to stand in front of him.

He blinked, shocked by her outburst. “I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

She sighed again and let herself fall onto the couch, putting her head in her hands. She stayed that way a moment before running her hands over her face and looking towards him again.

“It was a mess Harry. You know how the whole family always seems so strong and together? It wasn’t like that at all. It was like Arthur was the keystone in the family. It surprised me, because I always thought it was Molly. But it wasn’t. Bill, Charlie, Percy, the twins-they were all there. And yet it was like a group of complete strangers living in the same house. Molly was trying to plan the wedding, which Percy and Penelope were trying to prevent. Ginny was refusing to talk to anyone. And then a few days after we came home, the strangest air settled over the house.”

“What was it?”

“It was like they made an effort to get on with their lives. But it wasn’t the Weasley family. It was just a bunch of redheaded actors who didn’t know the lines and kept missing their cues. The guys sat for six straight hours in the living room and talked about nothing except Quidditch. And everyone sat there with them and I swear to you, that’s all we talked about.”

“I don’t know if I could have handled that.”

The mood lightened considerably as she laughed. “Oh, it was awful. I’ve never wanted to know that much about the Cannons. Really, that orange is such an awful colour.”

Harry nodded. “I love Quidditch, but six hours?”

Hermione was shaking her head and grinning. “You don’t have to tell me. And after that, there was another change. It was like everything went back to normal. And it got so hectic.”

“Why didn’t you come home?”

“I tried. Molly kept insisting I stay.”

He gently took her hand in his. “I’m glad you’re here now.”

“So am I. It’s so wonderful to be back. I missed you and my mum a lot.”

“Did you have a good time with your mum this afternoon?”

“Oh, it was wonderful. I’ve missed her so much. It’s so interesting that you’re going to be working with her. She said that I was welcome to join the sessions, as long as that was all right with you.”

“That would be fine.”

“Good. She mentioned that she gave you some books to read?” Hermione looked as if she would devour the books in one sitting given the opportunity.

“Yeah, remind me later to show them to you.”

“How is the Pensieve coming along?”

“I’m ready to finish it.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful, Harry. I’m sure Dumbledore is anxious to see it.”

Harry just nodded as she continued talking about the reading she done about Pensieves. As she began discussing the merits of a marble bowl over a granite bowl, Harry interrupted her.

“Hermione?” he said, taking her other hand and clasping them both in his own hands.

“Hmm? Oh, I’m sorry.” she mumbled as she looked down at their joined hands and smiled.

“Where do we go from here?”

“What do you mean?” She looked at him for a moment, her confusion evident in her eyes. He raised an eyebrow and she instantaneously grasped his meaning. “Oh! About us…”

“Yes. Hermione, is there an us?”

She smiled softly and gazed at him. “I certainly hope so.”

He grinned at her. “So do I.”

Their matching grins subsided and they stared at one another.

Harry wasn’t sure who made the first move but before he knew what was happening, Hermione’s lips were on his and he was slowly falling into her kisses. She kissed him softly, letting the moments pass by languidly.

“I missed you so much.”

“You said that already.”

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At quarter to nine, Harry walked back into the lounge. He had dressed in denim jeans and a t-shirt. Hermione was standing in front of the coffee table, wearing a deep blue robe.

“Are we to wear robes?” Harry asked, looking once at Hermione before looking at his own clothing.

“I’m not sure, I suppose so. I just came out here and they were sitting in packages on the table. Yours is right there,” she gestured towards a thin, wrapped box sitting on the table.

Harry crossed the room and picked up the parcel, tearing off the brown paper. A non-descript box was inside. He took off the lid and saw deep purple robes.

“Purple? Eh.”

“Oh, Harry. Just put them on, I’m sure they’ll look fine.”

He raised an eyebrow at her before putting on the heavy robes. After adjusting them a bit, he signalled to Hermione that he was ready and she led the way from the room.

They walked silently through the halls, heading towards Dumbledore’s office. Professor McGonagall was waiting for them, dressed in robes of very dark grey. She nodded to them and they followed after.

Harry wasn’t sure how long they walked for, but he was beginning to wonder if they would make the ten o’clock meeting. They were trekking through another unknown part of Hogwarts, having walked down several flights of stairs until Harry was sure they must be under the castle.

Their footsteps echoed on the stone floor and Harry figured they must be halfway to Hogsmeade before McGonagall stopped in front of an ancient looking door. She turned to them.

“Please put your hoods up,” she instructed them, doing the same thing. When they had done so, she nodded again. “They’re waiting for us. Please do as you are instructed.”

She knocked three times on the door and it slowly creaked open. Harry involuntarily shivered at the noise.

They walked into a dimly lit room. Harry blinked several times, allowing his eyes to adjust. The only light in the room seemed to be coming from some sort of orb at the centre of a large, rectangular table. Quickly scanning his eyes over the room, Harry saw eleven figures seated at the table and three empty chairs. One of the empty chairs was seated next to a tall figure wearing what appeared to be dark green robes. The other two were near the middle of the table.

Wordlessly, McGonagall directed them towards the empty chairs and moved to sit in the other. When they were settled, the figure in green began to speak.

“A millennium ago, the Order of Ariel was formed to protect the wizarding world should a dark evil ever arise. Slowly, times changed and over the years, the Order disbanded. Nearly two decades ago, we reinstated the Order against the Darkest evil we have ever known. It is today that we once again meet in the Chamber of the Order to induct two members into our numbers.”

Harry could feel Hermione’s eyes boring into him, but he denied the urge to look in her direction. He looked toward who he now figured was Dumbledore. He watched Dumbledore slowly turn the thick parchment pages of a very ancient leather volume. “As is an ancient and standard rite of the Order, we may begin tonight by the Sharing of Powers. I ask that each of the eight members of the Order share one special ability with our new members.”

Harry watched in amazement as each of the eight figures seated on the sides of the table rose. They all murmured a variation of a spell that Harry couldn’t even begin to recognise. After the speaker had finished the incantation, he or she would place the wand an inch above the glass orb. A string of light would flow from the wand and into the orb, lighting it up in strange colours. They went around the table and when the last person had spoke, Dumbledore cleared his throat.

The two figures at the other end of the table stood, as did Dumbledore. Dumbledore lifted the heavy book from the table and turned a few more of the pages.

Harry’s heart jumped into his throat as Dumbledore began to speak. Mage. Once more, he felt Hermione’s eyes on him and he turned to face her. She was staring at him, eyes wide and he could almost see her mind turning. He took a deep breath as the feeling of calm washed over him. He closed his eyes, picturing the words in his mind.

*Powers unite, bound by the Order.*

Harry’s eyes shot open and he looked again at Hermione. She had her eyes closed and was listening intently to Dumbledore’s words. He turned to face Dumbledore, concentrating on every syllable and accent of his words. Unsure of what had just happened, Harry concentrated his efforts into understanding the words. Suddenly, the members at the table stood at once and turned towards the end of the table where the last couple was sitting. They all spoke at once.

*Protect.*

The glass orb brightened blindingly and Harry averted his eyes towards Hermione. It dimmed slightly and Harry turned back. All at once, a great burst of light shot from the orb and straight at the inductees. Once again, Harry turned away from the bright light.

He shut his eyes, expecting to feel something strange wash over him. He opened his eyes a bit, trying to figure out what was going on. He looked towards the end of the table, where the two mysterious figures had been sitting, the pair that had not added anything to the orb. Dumbledore’s words echoed in his mind.

*Eight members.*

He quickly pictured the table in his mind. Eight members. Four on each side of the table, plus he and Hermione, and McGonagall and Dumbledore. He shook his head confused. Who was being inducted?

The unknown couple at the end were standing now, bathed in a yellow, iridescent light. The orb was floating above them, casting the light onto them.

The room was almost instantly thrown into darkness. Harry blinked again. His mind was reeling, trying to process everything that had just happened. Who was being inducted? Had he understood Mage? And what exactly was this Order? He looked in the direction of Hermione and in the same instant, felt her hand on his leg, searching for his hand. He reached for her hand and intertwined his fingers with hers, which he noticed were shaking slightly. He squeezed lightly.

After a few long moments, two torches by the entrance flickered on. Dumbledore was standing there, ushering members of the Order out. Harry and Hermione stood, hands still clasped and followed after the others. They all walked in silence down the stone passage.

The walk back to IMS wasn't nearly as long as the walk to the Chamber of the Order. Harry and Hermione went their separate ways with only a chaste kiss, each mentally exhausted. Harry had barely removed his robes when he collapsed onto his bed, mumbling *Nox* before his eyelids grew heavy and he was sinking into a dreamless sleep.

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The week passed in relative quiet. Harry and Hermione juggled working on the journal and lessons with Ami and Rachel. Harry also spent a great deal of time working on his Pensieve.

“Are you nearly finished?”

“Nearly. I just have to put this potion stuff into the bowl.”

“What kind of bowl did you end up getting?” Hermione asked from her spot on Harry's bed. She had surrounded herself with the books from Rachel and was burying her mind in information.

“The white marble one.”

“With the Aramaic runes or the Egyptian hieroglyphics?”

“Erm, I think the Aramaic.”

Hermione looked up and raised her eyebrow. “You aren't sure?”

“I don't remember what I told McGonagall.”

“It makes a big difference, you know.”



“I know. I’m pretty sure it’s the Aramaic. I remember reading that those were more conducive to properly sifting through memories.”

Hermione just nodded and went back to her readings. They fell into a comfortable silence once more, Harry stirring his potion and waiting for it to become the proper clear colour.

“Ron is coming back today,” Hermione said after a few minutes, without looking at him.

Harry stopped stirring the potion. “What?”

“Ron. He’s coming back today. The wedding is in two days. All the Weasleys will be here.”

“Oh.”

Hermione said nothing and Harry waited a few moments before returning to the potion.

The liquid inside his cauldron was a milky white colour. He stirred it, holding his wand steadily over the top of the cauldron and making a slow swirling motion, which was slowly beginning to tire his wrist. As the potion began to clear, he stopped stirring again.

“Hermione?”

“Hm?”

“Are we going to tell him?”

“Tell him what?”

“About us?”

She finally looked up at him, giving him a measuring look. “I suppose that that’s up to you.”

“Do you want me to tell him?”

She shrugged. “That seems like a conversation you should have with him. I guess I’m sort of enjoying this time where it’s just us. Without all the other factors that seem to run everything else.”

Harry nodded and started stirring again. “Do you think he’ll be upset?”

“I hope not. Honestly, we broke up how long ago? And it wasn’t working anyhow; he was too involved with Lavender. And I really think there’s something between him and Parvati.”

“Hm. A ladies’ man, then?” Harry chided, winking at her.

“Indeed. I think you should tell him. He’d probably kill us if we don’t tell him.”

“Probably. I guess I’ll talk to him tonight after dinner.”

“I’m sure that’d be best.”

The room fell silent again. Harry continued the monotonous stirring, beginning to believe that making a Pensieve was perhaps the most time stealing task he had ever undertaken.

Finally, after what felt like hours and every switching back and forth between his wrists several times, the potion was as clear as glass.

“Hermione, I think it’s ready.”

She jumped out of her nest of books and stumbled over to the work table.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes, my legs are asleep, but other than that, I’m fine. Let me see it.”

He showed her the clear substance.

“It looks as it should, I believe. At least going on what the research says...”

Harry nodded. “I’m going to go call McGonagall on the fireplace and see if I can come pick up the basin.”

“Good idea. The sooner we get this finished, the closer we’ll be to solving this puzzle.”

Harry walked out of the room, shaking his wrists to loosen the tight muscles. He walked over to the fireplace and tossed a handful of the special Floo powder into the flickering flames. He took a deep breath and grimaced as he stuck his head into the purple flames.

After calling McGonagall (and grimacing because of the strange tickling sensations from the flames) and going to pick up the basin, he returned to find Hermione somewhat anxious to get started.

“Perhaps we ought to wait until later,” he suggested, looking at her excited features.

“Wait for what?”

“Ron to get here.”

“Why would Ron want to watch you sieve your memories into a Pensieve?”

“Alright, we’ll do it now. Maybe we’ll finish before dinner.”

He set the heavy basin onto the work table, next to his cooled cauldron. Hermione handed him the wooden ladle that Snape had given him, expressly for this purpose. He dipped the ladle in, looking once more at the book laid out next to him. He followed the instructions to a ‘t’ and was soon standing next to the bowl, holding his wand at the ready.

“Now what do you do?”

“I say this charm, and start putting the memories into the bowl.”

“Do you want me to stay with you?”

Harry pondered this, his mind running over what he had read in the manual on Pensieves. “It’s best if you don’t. It doesn’t sound like the most pleasant of tasks.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

She walked to the bed and picked up a few of her books and some parchment. She walked towards him and kissed him softly on the lips. “Good luck.”

In lieu of an answer, he slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her close, planting a firm kiss on her mouth.

She grinned at him, a faint blush coming over her cheeks. “Right then. See you at dinner, if not before.”

He gave her a lopsided smile and watched her leave the room before turning back to the table. He held his wand to his temple and muttered the words that he had read time and again.

No book could prepare him for the odd feelings coursing through his mind. He felt as if someone had opened up his mind and was picking through his thoughts and he had never felt so vulnerable. His instinct told him to draw his wand away from his temple, and as his arm moved toward the basin, the feelings of invasion subsided and a wave of relief washed over him. He continued the motion of placing the wand at his temple and pulling the individual memories from his thoughts.

The scenes in the graveyard flashed in his memory like photographs as he sifted them away. He felt oddly removed from his memories as he placed them into the basin. They remained in his conscious thoughts, though as shadows of his former memories. His eyes watched the swirling contents of the bowl as each memory merged into the depths. An image would appear, brighten, swirl and fade into a silvery substance.

Nearly two hours later, his experiences in the graveyard were in the Pensieve. He placed his wand on the desk and settled onto his bed, weary from the spells. He heard a soft knock on his door and after a moment, Hermione walked into the room.

“Harry? Are you all right?”

“Tired. I finished though.”

“Finished? Already?”

“It’s quick work really. I’m pretty sure that I put everything in there. There’s lots more I want to add later, after Dumbledore sees it. It seems so much easier than writing in a diary.”

“But it seems so taxing,” she observed as she sat next to him and began to slowly rub his shoulders.

“I doubt it’s standard practice to put so much in at once. Dumbledore only placed a few memories into his Pensieve the afternoon where I first saw it. He didn’t seem bothered.”

She made a noise of agreement and pulled slightly back slightly on his shoulders until he readjusted himself and lay down against the pillows. She rested against him and he looped his arms around her, planting a kiss on the top of her head.

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“Harry! Hermione! Are you here?”

Harry eyes shot open and he moved quickly off the bed. He tiptoed across the room, making sure not to make Hermione, and opened the door leading to the lounge.

“Ron?”

“Harry!”

His redheaded friend was standing in the entry from the common room, holding a valise and a backpack.

Harry crossed the room and was surprised when Ron pulled him into a hug. “Good to see you. Where’s Herm?”

“She’s asleep. I’ve been working on my Pensieve.” He cringed slightly, reminding himself that it was not a lie.

“Ah, that’s good.”

Ron set his things down in the corner of the room and settled onto the sofa. Harry sat in a chair opposite him and Ron immediately began to discuss the upcoming wedding.

Harry half listened for awhile before suddenly interrupting Ron. “There’s something we need to talk about.”

Ron sighed and nodded. “I know. There is.”

“Oh. Well... do you want to start then?” Harry asked, shifting uncomfortably in his chair.

“Sure. Well, you know my past with Hermione. I’d say that you probably know it better than we do. But this summer was different. We got along smashingly, hardly fault at all. The point, Harry, is that I think I’m still crazy about her. And I think we have a chance to get back together and make it work.”

Harry couldn’t have been more surprised than if Draco Malfoy had walked through the door wearing a purple cape and told him that he was eloping with Hedwig.

“Hermione? You’re still crazy about Hermione?”

“Yes. Isn’t that great? Think about it, Harry. It’ll be just as it should. Maybe there’s even a chance of reconciliation between you and my sister?”

Harry sputtered wordlessly, staring at Ron with very wide eyes.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that? Don’t you think it’ll fly?”

“Erm.”

Suddenly, the door from Hermione’s room opened and Hermione stepped out, looking refreshed from her nap. Harry turned his gaping stare towards her, wondering where she had come from.

“Ron! I’m so glad you’re back!”

He was beaming at her and nearly leapt out of his chair to hug her in greeting. She returned his embrace and raised her eyebrow at Harry over Ron’s shoulder.

Harry couldn’t help the twinge of jealousy as he shrugged and stared at the back of Ron’s head.

“You talked to Harry then?”

“Yes. We talked everything through.”

“That’s wonderful!” She smiled at both of them and walked over to sit on the couch, as close to Harry’s chair as she could be. She grinned at him, not noticing that Ron was, in fact, beaming at her.

Ron nodded and sat next to her. “Do you suppose we all ought to head to dinner then?”

“That sounds great. I’m starved.” Hermione beamed at both of them.

“Me too. It was a long trip.”

Hermione nodded. “Harry has been working all afternoon. Are you hungry?”

Harry looked at them both, his stomach churning. “I’ve suddenly lost my appetite.”

## Chapter Four- Choices

**"Other people's opinion of you does not have to become your reality."-Les Brown**

Hermione had worked out soon enough that all was not as it seemed. During the walk to the kitchens, she had been excited, chattering happily about the time she had been spending with her mother. Just as Ron was reaching to tickle the pear, Hermione had turned to look at Harry.

He had trailed behind on the way downstairs, keeping counsel with himself. He debated internally: What should he tell Hermione? What should he tell Ron? The debate subsided rather quickly and was replaced with feelings of great annoyance and even a little worry. What business did Ron have deciding he wanted another chance with Hermione? Had Hermione done anything to make Ron think that there was a chance for reconciliation? Had she been giving him mixed signals?

He felt the odd sensation of someone inside his head for just a quick moment before it disappeared completely. He shook himself, trying to dispel his sense of unease at the oddness of the situation when he caught Hermione's gaze. Her toffee eyes were wide and the look of her face had shifted dramatically. Gone was the sparkle in her eye, and in its place was a look of agitated horror. He nodded softly, knowing that somehow, she had read his thoughts. She sighed audibly as the portrait was pulled open by Ron, who looked about ready to start whistling.

Dinner was quiet and went by rather slowly. Harry brooded most of the meal, leaving Ron feeling slightly awkward in response to his friend's behaviour. Hermione struggled with small talk and the handful of Professors at the table didn't seem in the mood for any sort of discussion. The plates cleared after what felt like an eternity and Harry quickly excused himself, citing exhaustion for his abrupt departure.

He walked quickly through the halls toward his dorm. His steps echoed loudly and he didn't diminish his speed until he noticed he was practically running down the hallway. He slowed down, the pounding steps dimming until there was only a soft thudding in the cavernous halls. He reached his dorm room and closed the door behind him, muttering a locking spell.

He pulled his t-shirt over his head and moved over to the wardrobe. Opening the drawer, he searched for his pyjamas. He rifled through the clothes, searching for the pyjamas. After a few minutes and a fruitless search, he turned to face the room, his eyes scanning over the room a few times before settling on the t-shirt and pants tossed in the corner of the room. He sighed, and walked towards the clothes.

As he was pulling on the pyjama pants, he heard a soft pop. He turned and was shocked to see Hermione standing in the middle of his room.

*"Hermione!"* He yanked the pyjama pants up and stared at her, annoyed.

She was blushing and a sheepish smile was creeping across her lips. "Sorry."

His look changed to one of incredulous horror.

“Oh, Harry, it’s not like you haven’t seen your share before. All’s fair in love and war.” She grinned at him, blushing slightly.

He blushed deeply, remembering the night last year when he had walked in on her changing. He opened his mouth to speak, but snapped it shut again, opting to just look at her instead. “Well, haven’t you ever heard of knocking?”

She laughed and shook her head as her expression changed to one of bemusement. “Had I used the door…”

“Why did you apparate in here anyhow?”

“Oh, yes. Because it would just be a brilliant idea to stroll through the lounge in my dressing gown to your room. Especially with Ron lying on the sofa.”

Harry sighed with resignation and pulled a t-shirt over his head. “Remind me again why he’s in there.”

“*Harry*, he’s our friend. And besides, Dumbledore requested that he stay here as a sort of protection.”

“I still don’t understand. This is *Hogwarts*. Isn’t it supposed to be the safest place in the wizarding world?”

Hermione just shrugged. “Everything is so different now. Besides, it’s really not that big of an issue.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Have you talked to Ron yet?”

“I thought you were going to talk to Ron.” She shifted uncomfortably as she said it, moving her gaze away from his.

“Well, for whatever reason, he seems to think you two have a bloody chance, so it’s probably best you talk with him. “

“But you’re his best friend.”

He sat down on the bed and looked at her. “Hermione, what happened at the Bur-“

A loud knock sounded on the door and Hermione’s soft smile immediately faded.

“Harry?” came Ron’s disembodied voice.

“Er, hold on a second, Ron! I’m, er, changing!” Harry called, springing off of the bed.

“Alright.”

Hermione looked slightly panicked and Harry motioned for her to go into the bathroom.

She moved stealthily towards the bathroom and slipped in just as Harry moved to open his bedroom door.

“Heya Ron, come on in.” Harry said, ignoring the questioning look on Ron’s face. Ron walked into the room and immediately sat down on the bed, where Hermione had been just moments before.

“Harry, I want to talk to you about Hermione.”

Harry gulped. “What about Hermione?”

“Well, before we went down to dinner, she seemed so happy. Then, once we got to the kitchens, it seemed like something had changed.”

Harry tried to keep his eyes on Ron, refusing to allow himself to look towards the bathroom. “I think we should go for a walk.”

“Why?”

Harry shrugged. “Well, Hermione might hear.”

“She won’t hear anything through two or three thick stone walls, Harry.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Ron gave him an odd look. “Now, about Hermione. Why’s she been acting so strangely?”

“How do you mean?”

Ron looked at him with a confused stare on his face. “What do you mean how do I mean? She was different! Is it that time-“

“Ron. No. That’s not it. I think there’s something I should tell you. Something I should have told you earlier.”

Ron narrowed his eyes at Harry. “What is it?”

Harry took a deep breath. “HermioneandIlikeeachother.”

The sharp intake of air was audible in the palpable silence that overtook the room.

“You. Harry. Like. Hermione?”

“Erm, yes. And she likes me. We’re...well, we’re together.”

Harry waited. And waited. And no response came. Ron stared at him icily for a few moments before slowly standing up.



“Ron?”

“I told you earlier what I felt for her! Don’t you think then would have been an a good time to tell me? It’s a good job I didn’t bloody well tell Hermione! How long were you going to bloody wait? Was I to get a surprise wedding invitation in the mail?”

Harry stared at his best friend. “I was just waiting for the right time to tell you.”

“Well now was fucking perfect Harry! Go on then, have a nice life!” Ron stalked across the room and flung open Harry’s door, which crashed against the wall.

The door to the bathroom opened and Hermione stood framed in dark shadows, a stricken look on her face.

They heard a loud pounding and she shook herself briefly.

“I’ll go talk to him. Maybe I can straighten this out.”

There was more pounding on her bedroom door and within a short moment, she was gone with a pop, leaving Harry to figure out exactly what had just happened.

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Harry, Hermione and Ron skirted around each other for the next few days. Ron was careful to avoid both of them most of the day and at meals, he would enter the kitchen, take something offered to him by one of the house elves and disappear to, presumably, the IMS common room. Harry and Hermione ignored each other whenever they were within view of Ron, which was rare. Ron had moved out into the common room; Dumbledore had refused to allow him to sleep in Gryffindor Tower alone. Wednesday finally came around and as the day wore on, Harry greatly looked forward to the lesson with Ami and Rachel.

“Hermione?” Harry said, knocking softly on her bedroom door.

“Come in.”

She was sprawled on her bed, her nose buried in one of the volumes Rachel had given him.

“I’m going to my lesson with Ami and Rachel now.”

She looked up at him before turning to the clock on her nightstand. “Oh, I’d completely lost track of time. I suppose I’m ready. It’s just my mum and Ami.”

Harry nodded silently as she stood up and brushed her clothes out.

“Is Ron still in the common room?”

“I think so.”

She peered at him for a moment. "Let's go then." She took his hand and practically pulled him through the lounge, a determined air to her step.

They walked quickly through the common room, hands linked and heading towards the Great Hall. Harry barely registered the red head sticking over the couch, distinctly facing away from them.

As soon as they had exited the common room, Harry stopped and turned to Hermione.

"What was the point of that?"

"Point of what?"

"Nearly wrenching my arm out of its socket and putting on a show for Ron!"

"Oh Harry, that was hardly a show. This hiding is the show, not that. That's how we act."

"Yes, because it is just so normal for us to walk around together, you dragging me around by my arm!"

"Harry, you've missed my point entirely. I don't want to hide. Especially not from Ron."

"I think we should have a little more tact than snogging senselessly in the halls."

"That was hand-holding, not snogging."

"Hermione, in Ron's eyes, it's the same thing."

"You know what, Harry? I don't care, I don't care! You're my boyfriend and I want to hold your hand. I want to kiss you. I want to have this one little aspect of my life be normal."

He couldn't help the grin that slid slowly across his lips.

"What? Why are you smiling at me like that?" she said, her tone softening as she moved in closer to him.

"You called me your boyfriend," he said quietly as he reached up to tuck a loose curl back.

She smiled at him before tilting her chin up to kiss him gingerly on the lips. "Well. You are."

He grinned again. "So I am."

She pulled away from him and smiled before offering her hand. "I promise I won't pull your arm out of the socket."

"Alright. But don't think this is settled. We need to tread carefully right now."

She sighed and nodded slowly. "I know."

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Ami and Rachel were sitting in the same classroom as usual, though they were relatively quiet and looked very tired. Rachel perked up somewhat as they came in.

“Evening.”

“Hi mum. Ami. I hope you don’t mind me joining tonight.” Hermione looked somewhat timid as she approached them, and Harry found it quite odd.

“Oh, not at all. Tonight will be our last quiet lesson. Next week, we’ll start working with Harry’s powers. Hermione, you’re welcome then as well.”

Hermione looked excited at the prospect and smiled, easing into the situation. “That would be wonderful.”

“So, Harry,” Rachel turned to him, “do you have any questions for us?”

He nodded and pulled out a chair to sit in front of Rachel and the still-quiet Ami. Hermione did the same and as soon as she was settled, he began. “I was reading through the books you gave me. Everything about the Magi and how it relates to the four keys still confuses me. And about Tristram-“

“Harry, you’ll have to forgive me for our last lesson. Tristram was a great and powerful wizard, but so little is known about him and his disappearance. Your news that he was in the graveyard is a rather important piece of information. I spoke with Dumbledore and based on what he could tell me, it seems that Tristram is, for whatever reason, helping Voldemort. This worries me, as, before the Order of Ariel was reinstated, Tristram was the last Guardian of the Order.”

She paused dramatically.

“Erm, mum?”

“Yes, Hermione?”

“What exactly is the Order?”

Rachel looked somewhat taken aback. “Well, it’s a society of wizards formed to protect the wizarding world from impending evils.”

“Yes, but why so...well, ordered? There were so many ceremonial portions of that meeting the other night.”

“It’s all tradition. The Sharing of the Powers and all that.”

“What is it for?”

Rachel sighed and looked at Hermione as if her daughter should already know the answer. “The Founders of Hogwarts created the Order when the school was founded. In order to protect the wizarding world, they created Hogwarts, which is more than a school. Imbedded in the very walls is a magic so powerful and so strong that there is only one way it can be defeated. An ancient type of magic was used to build this place and only an ancient magic could make Hogwarts unsafe. The Order was originally created to control the magic and protect the secrets of Hogwarts. However, as the years have gone by, the exact science of the magic is gone. It is really unknown how the school was created.”

Harry looked back and forth between Rachel and Hermione. Rachel was watching Hermione studiously scribble everything she had just said. He felt his mind stretching, attempting to consume everything Rachel had just told them.

“You mean there’s no written record of the Founding?” Hermione asked suddenly, having finished her note taking.

“Not really. There’s speculation and whatnot, but there’s really no concrete account on how the school was built. We can assume it was via some magical means, but really we know very little about it.”

“If we don’t know anything about the ancient magic or whatever, then what is the point of the Order?” Harry inquired, looking at Rachel with his eyebrows knit in concentration.

“As I’m sure you noted, the Order originally consisted of four, plus one Guardian. The membership has grown to ten, plus one Guardian and another person, who just assists the Order. As a group, we are much the same as the original four; just there are more of us. Rather than protecting an ancient magic, we seek instead to prevent too much Dark magic in the world.”

“Too much?” Hermione asked incredulously, staring at her mother. “Why not get rid of all Dark magic?”

“Surely, Hermione, you understand the importance of balance in nature. There must be some Dark magic in the world, to ensure a natural harmony, for even too much good can become evil. However, we are here to prevent the balance from shifting. It is a precarious balance, but it exists nonetheless.”

Rachel then launched into a talk about the history of the Order, detailing for them great historical victories. Harry half-listened; his mind often drifted to Hermione or to other random thoughts. Hermione, however, was listening intently; she scribbled notes occasionally and asked questions about particular events or people.

When she had finished her long diatribe, she looked at them. “Any questions?”

Harry was jerked away from his daydreams and blinked a few times. “Hmm?”

Rachel raised an eyebrow at him. “Any questions?”

“Erm...no.”

“How does this all connect?” Hermione said, not looking up from her notes.

“What do you mean?” Rachel asked, furrowing her brow.

“Well... we know a little about the Four Keys, but not much. Tristram is a mystery. Harry’s powers. The Order. What’s the tie?”

Ami spoke up. “I don’t think we really have an answer for that. Not yet anyhow. We’ve encountered a bit of a snag.”

“How so?” Hermione asked, looking directly at Ami.

“Well, we’ve unearthed some interesting documents...” Ami picked up a leather case from the desk next to her, pulling it open and flipping through it. “Here.” She handed Hermione an old piece of parchment.

Hermione looked it over, her eyes widening.

“What is it Hermione?” Rachel said, looking at her daughter strangely.

Hermione thrust the paper at Harry. He took it from her slowly, and looked at it, his eyes taking in the familiar scrawling hand and the odd words.

“It’s-ow!” Harry looked aghast at Hermione, who was sitting primly in her desk, hands folded casually on the table.

“It’s what?” Rachel asked, narrowing her eyes at the pair.

“Er... nothing.” Harry said softly. “I thought it looked familiar, but I was wrong.”

It was obvious by the look on her face that she didn’t believe either of them. Narrowing her eyes at them, she spoke softly, “If you don’t know what it is... we’ll just have to continue looking into it.

Harry nodded slowly, avoiding both Rachel and Hermione’s gazes. He looked down at his hands, tracing the lines on his palms with his eyes as Rachel continued to talk.

“...and next lesson, I want to work on the telepathy. Dumbledore feels that if Harry is able to hone this skill, it’ll give us a slight advantage in this war.”

Hermione was nodding at Rachel as Harry picked up bits of their conversation. He was suddenly a bit uncomfortable in the room and his attention wandered to the window. The room was reflected in the glass, an odd orange light cast over the room from the torches on the walls. He watched as Rachel discussed their next lesson, as Hermione nodded in agreement and as Ami twiddled a quill in her fingers. He noticed in the reflection that she was looking directly at him and he turned his gaze to her.

The bored look on her face matched his and they smiled secretly at each other.

*I love this...really, I do.*

Harry nearly spoke out loud as the voice rocketed through his mind. *I didn't know this still worked.*

*Of course it does. The Fidelius Charm is still in place.*

*True. If you don't like this, then why did you volunteer to do it?*

*I could be asking you the same question.*

Harry paused, trying to think over his response. *Well, I wanted to learn more about this Mage business. I did sort of think we'd be doing more practical lessons, instead of all this theoretical stuff.*

*Hmm, we'll be getting to that next lesson. I think this history bit is rather boring as well. I'm anxious to try out some of the things I was reading about.*

Harry laughed inside his head. *Should I consider myself some sort of magical experiment?*

Ami tried to hide a smile. *But, of course. It's actually pretty interesting. You've got some neat powers.*

*Harry?*

Harry tipped slightly in his chair as another voice entered his head. He quickly severed his mental tie with Ami and looked at Hermione, who looked startled.

"Yes, Hermione?" he said cautiously.

Rachel looked bewildered. "Harry! She didn't say anything!"

Hermione shook her head. "Er... yes, I did. I said 'Harry?'"

"You did?" Rachel said, looking ever more confused.

"Um, yes."

"I think I'm tired." Rachel peeked at her wristwatch. "Ah, looks to be about that time. We've been here nearly three hours. Hard to believe, isn't it?"

Harry avoided Ami's eyes as he nodded at Rachel.

They said their goodbyes then and Harry and Hermione walked out of the room. As soon as they were out of range, Hermione grabbed Harry by the arm and pulled him between two suits of armour.

"What happened?" she said, just barely above a whisper.

“Don’t ask me! *You* talked inside *my* head, remember?”

“Do you think it was the telepathy?”

Harry sighed. “I’m not sure. Why don’t you ask Ami?”

“How would she know?”

Harry just shrugged and Hermione gave him an odd look before peering out beyond the armour. She linked her fingers through his and they strolled slowly through the corridors of the castle.

They made it back to the common room in good time and Hermione stopped just outside the door and turned to Harry again, looking at him expectantly.

He smiled at her. “What?”

“Do I get a kiss goodnight?”

“Ah, but it is not yet goodnight. Will you meet for a walk tonight? We could even stroll outside. It’s a beautiful night.”

“Aww, Mr Potter, are you asking me for a midnight stroll?”

Harry blushed and laughed softly. “You could say that.”

“What time is it?”

“Just after ten.”

She moved closer to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Meet me here at half past twelve,” she whispered in his ear.

He looked at her and kissed her lightly. “I’ll be here.”

She slipped into the common room and the door closed behind her. Harry counted to one hundred and fifty before opening the door.

Ron was sleeping on the couch, his wild red hair sticking in all directions on the pillow and his pyjamas twisted. The blanket was bunched around his legs.

Harry felt himself frowning as he looked at his best friend, wondering if they’d be able to repair their differences.

He moved across the room quietly and stopped at his door to look back at his friend once more.

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“Harry?” Hermione whispered, looking around the empty entrance hall.

“Hermione. Over here.” Harry pulled off the Invisibility Cloak and walked towards her.

“I thought perhaps you’d forgotten,” Hermione said, smiling at him.

He smiled back and laced his fingers with hers, pulling her towards the doors. When they had reached them, Harry moved to open the door, but as he stepped closer, he heard the sound of drumming rain outside.

“It’s raining,” he said softly as he turned towards Hermione.

“It is?”

“Do you just want to walk through the castle?”

“Will we need the Invisibility Cloak?”

“Not really, I just brought it with me in case something were to happen.”

“Oh. Well, I suppose it’s alright.”

They started off towards one of the staircases off the Entrance Hall and Harry tucked the cloak under his arm.

After a few minutes of silence, Harry heard Hermione take a breath.

“Is something wrong?”

“I feel like my mind is going a million miles an hour.”

“And this is different how?” Harry said, smiling at her.

She squeezed his hand and he saw her lips moving slightly at the corners before she began to speak again. “I feel like we’re missing something; something big that’s right in front of us. I need to know if I can learn Mage or not. I’m nearly 100 percent positive that the Prophecy is in Mage and if I was able to understand it, maybe we’d get a clue on how this all fit together.”

“I’m sure you can learn it. There’s always my Penseive, maybe that’ll help.”

She seemed to consider this. “Maybe.”

He squeezed her hand again and they continued walking.

“Harry, where are we?” Hermione had stopped and was looking at her surroundings.

He looked around as well. “Oh. Actually, I’m not sure. I came through here a few nights ago though, don’t worry.”



She knitted her eyebrows. "You didn't get lost?"

"Not really. I eventually found my way back to the common room."

"Okay." She said this slowly, looking at him for assurance before taking his hand again.

"Harry?" she looked at him as she said this, breaking the silence that had accompanied them after she had asked of their whereabouts.

"Hm?"

"Do you think Ron will stay angry long?"

"Probably. He tends to be a bit stubborn."

Hermione chuckled ruefully. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

"Yeah."

"I worry. There's one spot open in IMS. And surely, Ron is the running, but it depends largely on his OWLs and his marks on the MQ test last year. If he doesn't get that space, do you think he'll still talk with us?"

"Hermione, I really think it will all work out for the best. Ron stays mad for a long time, but it doesn't take much to get him un-angry after he has decided he's bored with the stubbornness."

"You're right. Am I worrying about nothing?"

"Not about nothing, but not about anything worthwhile in the long run."

"Maybe."

They settled into a silence again, but Harry noticed that Hermione seemed to be actively analysing their surroundings. Her eyes were bouncing around, taking in the odd paintings and statues.

"This is a very old part of the castle." Her voice was barely audible as she spoke, a note of awe barely creeping into her voice.

"Wasn't the entire castle built at the same time?"

"Maybe old was the wrong word. This part of the castle hasn't been used in a very--"

"What?" Harry looked at her, confused.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

“That noise. It sounded like footsteps.”

As soon as she said it, he heard them as well. Harry turned behind him, but saw nothing. He looked at Hermione a moment before pulling her back against the wall, staying near to another piece of armour. Within seconds, he had the cloak draped around them and a hand clasped tightly to Hermione’s.

They waited. For what felt like hours. Harry could practically hear his wristwatch ticking away and Hermione’s shallow breathes seemed downright thundering.

“Oh...” she gasped.

The footsteps had become very clear and were coming closer. He felt his heart beating in his chest.

The blonde head was the first thing noticeable in the moonlit corridor. The tall, slender figure moved towards them and he felt Hermione relax next to him. Without warning, she let go of his hand.

“Draco?”

“Oh, Hermione. Hello. How are you?”

Harry stared at the two figures standing in front of him, a mere ten feet away. Hermione seemed to be getting on amicably with Draco, unlike he had been unable to do.

“Harry and I were taking a walk-“

“Oh, is Potter around here somewhere with his cloak?”

“How did you know about the cloak?”

“Well, he had it the other night when he was out prowling around the castle, and he had it at the exams last year, I think.”

“Oh, that’s right. Well, yes, he does have it with him. Like I say, we were out walking and we heard footsteps coming, so we hid behind the armour over there.”

Harry could see Draco smirking. “Is that what they’re calling it now? Hiding?”

“Oh, now, that’s the oldest one in the book.”

Was *she* flirting with *him*? He shook his head as he watched their exchange. Draco was chatting rather nicely and Hermione was laughing, occasionally shifting her eyes in Harry’s direction.

After a few moments of general banter and small talk, Hermione walked back towards him. He took this as his signal to remove the cloak.

“Evening, Potter.”

“Malfoy.”

Hermione looked between them before throwing her hands up in the air. “Shall we continue on then?”

She began walking, slightly ahead of Harry and Draco, who were walking as far apart from each other as they could without bumping into various columns and statues. Harry remembered this path as they walked and when Hermione made a left when they came to a forked corridor, he was tempted to tell her that right would lead back to the entrance hall. Something in her stride prevented this and he let her walk on.

As they began to descend a case of very dark stairs, he felt something stir inside him. One look at Hermione revealed that she was receiving the same sensations. Malfoy, however, looked oblivious.

As they walked further, the hairs on the back of Harry’s neck began to prickle and he walked a tad faster to make a grab for Hermione’s hand, which she willingly took. The stairs became a long corridor, which was growing increasingly darker. It wasn’t long until Malfoy had pulled out his wand and muttered “Lumos.”

The light from the wand tip did little to brighten the dark area. Harry turned his head, looking around them. The narrow corridor has broadened into some sort of chamber, the ceiling of which was obscured by dark shadows that the light did not quite reach.

“Where are we?” Hermione was the first to speak, a hushed whisper that was both fearful and curious.

“I’m not sure. But look.” Draco was pointing towards the far wall. They moved towards it, Harry and Hermione having taken out their wands as well.

There were four slots engraved in the ancient stone wall. Draco and Harry simultaneously reached hands out to touch the tapered, rectangular slots.

“What do those carvings mean?”

“Carvings?”

“The four animals,” Hermione gestured towards the animals above the slots.

Harry moved closer to the wall and stretched his fingers to trace over the animals. Each animal was a few inches above the slots.

The first was some sort of bird that Harry couldn’t quite place. It was a larger bird, he assumed, but as they were just carvings, there was no colour. The second animal was obviously a phoenix, and the one next to it was some sort of cat. The fourth one was distinguishable by its eight legs.

“A spider,” Hermione said aloud as she too traced her fingers over it.

Draco and Harry turned to her. “Do you know what they are?” Draco asked quietly.

“Not quite. I’ll look into it.”

“What about the slots?” Harry asked her.

“Give me your wand, Harry.”

He looked sceptical. “Why?”

“I think they’re some sort of wand holder.”

“No way, Hermione. For all we know, you’ll put it in that slot and it’ll be absorbed into the wall.”

“I’m not going to actually put it in there.”

“Use your own wand.”

She looked somewhat surprised at this. “Oh... good idea.”

“The slots are different lengths,” Draco said suddenly. “Look,” he pointed.

Harry looked where the other boy was pointing and saw that the bottoms were at different intervals. The long indentures in the wall varied greatly. The one under the bird was long and somewhat wider than the others. Under the phoenix was a slot of medium length and on the thicker side. The cat-like creature stood over a narrow and short carved area and the spider was atop a slot that was short and nearly as wide as the one under the raven.

“What do you suppose this is?” Hermione turned to ask her companions.

Draco shrugged as Harry did. “Beyond me,” Harry answered her.

Hermione bit her bottom lip for a moment. “Do you think we’ll remember how to get back here?”

“We?” Draco asked.

“Yes, we,” Hermione answered, raising a single eyebrow at him.

Draco looked at her and Harry watched their odd exchange, trying to puzzle out when they had even started to be on speaking terms with one another.

“Fine. We. Yes, I’m sure we’ll be able to find this place again, Hermione.”

She nodded and turned from them, heading back towards the stairs they had previously descended.

## Chapter Five: Fear

**It is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live. -**  
Marcus Aurelius

Admittedly, he hated weddings. He'd also never been to one. However, judging by the ridiculous formal robes he was wearing, Harry was very much beginning to believe that weddings were designed to be as uncomfortable as possible for any and all men involved. Everything the men took part in was designed to be terrible; he was completely convinced of it. The shoes pinched his feet. The robes were slightly heavy for summer, even in Scotland, and they were made of very itchy material. And worst of all was his terrible hangover.

Two days prior to the wedding, Harry had received a rather rude awakening from a post owl. He'd been hit in the face with a thick parchment envelope. Upon opening it, he had found a letter from Percy explaining that one of his groomsmen for the wedding had been involved in some sort of Quidditch accident and that he needed someone to fill his spot. Hermione had pushed him to help Percy and Harry had written to him, agreeing to stand up with Percy. Not a few hours after the post owl had set off with his response did Harry receive a call on the fireplace. The head of Penelope Clearwater was floating in the flames, her face looking quite harried.

"Harry?"

"Err, hello, Penelope. How are you?"

"Fine, thanks. I'm in a bit of a rush this morning. Only two days left." She smiled at him, a tense, worried smile. "Percy has told me that you'll be filling in for Carl. Bloody Quidditch accident. I'm not sure who told him it would be alright to ride on a broom backwards. Honestly." She was shaking her head and her black curls were bobbing back and forth. "Anyhow, I'll need you to be in Hogsmeade at Gladrags at two o'clock for your robe fittings. Percy will meet you there and he'll fill you on the ins and outs of the wedding. I believe Ginny has a fitting there as well, also at two. I can't tell you how much I appreciate this Harry."

"Oh, really, it's not problem. I'm glad I could be of help."

"Thanks again. I really must run, Mother is running ragged trying to get our few relatives settled in. They'll be travelling to Hogsmeade tomorrow. Goodbye Harry."

She blinked out before he had a chance to respond.

The following two days were very much a whirlwind. Beginning with the fittings at Gladrags, Harry had also had to help Percy and the other Weasleys set up various protective wards. There would be a handful of muggles at the wedding, all family of Penelope and all completely aware of the wizarding world. There would also be some 400 witches and wizards. Through Percy's work at the Ministry and Penelope's work for Gringotts, they had hundreds of close, personal friends who were invited to the wedding. Harry snorted as Percy explained

this to them. His two days' experience with the wedding had convinced him that he never wanted one. The Weasleys, aside from Percy obviously, seemed to have the same idea.

At the rehearsal, Molly Weasley was promptly directed to her seat by a wedding coordinator that Penelope's father, Neil, had hired. There were people bustling to and fro and Mrs Weasley seemed annoyed that she didn't have a hand in anything. Harry was promptly pushed towards the back of the room.

"Are you Harry?" a young woman with curly black hair and blue eyes said to him.

"Yes. Um, where am I supposed to be?" he asked.

"I'm Allena, Penelope's younger sister. You'll be escorting Ginny, so if you could just move over there..." She directed him towards where Ginny was sitting on a bench.

"Hullo, Harry."

"Hey, Gin. Having fun?"

She just stared at him. "Oh yes. You know, I never much liked Penelope before. I could stand her, but I found her somewhat annoying. The past two days have taught me that I would never like to have a wedding. Do you think my mum would be upset if I elope?"

Harry remembered the look on Mrs Weasley's face as the wedding planner had explained to her all about various charms placed on the wedding cake. Mrs Weasley had looked somewhat harassed by the young woman and Harry couldn't tell if it was about the cake or the fact that Neil Clearwater had hired a wedding planner.

"I'm really not sure Gin. Besides, that's a long way off," he teased.

She smiled at him. Almost as quickly as the smile had appeared, it disappeared and was replaced with what could only be a look of fear.

"Harry," said a gruff voice behind him. Ron was standing about ten feet away looking furious. "Oy, are you hitting on my sister now as well? Hermione isn't enough for you?"

Ginny's eyes grew wider. "Harry? You're with Hermione now?"

"Err...yeah," he answered quietly, avoiding her eyes.

"Why, that's wonderful!" she said as she hugged him. "I'm very happy for you two!"

Harry was astounded, but not as much as Ron. The boy's ears were quickly going red and his lips were drawn so tightly, they nearly disappeared. With one final glare, Ron turned on his heel and stomped off towards the girl who had introduced herself as Allena.

As Ginny opened her mouth to speak, the high-strung wedding planner swooped into the hall where the wedding party was milling about. "We will begin the procession now. I want you lined up as follows. Bill and Lucy, Charlie and Viridian, Fred and Gaynor, George and

Calynn, Ron and Allena, and Harry and Ginny. Penelope, dear, you stand behind them.” At that, she turned away from the group and spoke into a small headpiece.

They lined up according to instruction and Harry peaked down the line of curly black heads in front of him. The only two that stood out were Lucy and Penelope’s older sister, Gaynor. Lucy’s light brown hair stood out amongst the row of dark haired women, but not nearly as much as Penelope’s sister. The thirty-year old woman had platinum blonde hair that was very obviously dyed, as the dark roots near her part suggested.

“That blonde one is Gaynor. She’s sort of the odd one out. A Muggle, not very good in school, not very intelligent. The other two are Calynn and Allena, twins. They’re 17,” Ginny whispered conspiratorially in Harry’s ear.

“Are they witches?” he asked quietly.

“Yes, though they didn’t attend Hogwarts. Both went to Beauxbatons.”

“What is it about that school?”

“What?”

“Nevermind.” Harry wondered why they had chosen to go to Beauxbatons, just as his aunt had.

Some music began playing and the planner began directing them down the aisle.

The rest of the rehearsal was rather boring. It was a run through of everything that would happen the next evening. The muggle minister performed wedding vows, followed by a Ministry officiant doing the same thing. Harry was very bored and the ceremony carried on for longer than half an hour.

When it was over, they were all rushed off to dinner at a restaurant in Hogsmeade that Harry had never been to. The wedding party, along with Mrs Weasley, Penelope’s parents and Percy’s friend, Carl, were seated in a private dining room. Fred and George somehow managed to get all the groomsmen seated at one end of the long table.

“We have something very important to discuss gentlemen. The stag party. Where shall we have it?” George asked, the picture of perfect seriousness.

“How about we all Apparate to Las Vegas?” Carl jumped in, sounding rather excited and pleased with himself.

“Erm, do you mean Las Vegas, Carl? In the US?” Fred asked.

“Yeah, that’s what I said! Los Vegas.”

They all looked at him for a moment before George shook his head. “I was thinking somewhere along the lines of London. A short Apparating distance, really.”

“Ron here can’t Apparate,” Charlie pointed out.

“Aye, you’re right. Well, we could just floo to the Leaky Cauldron and go from there. I’m sure Tom won’t mind.”

They all nodded in agreement, except for Harry and Ron. Ron looked rather annoyed at being the reason they were using floo and Harry felt odd having any input in the plans.

Dinner was just as boring as the rehearsal. Penelope’s family ended up being horribly boring, with the exception of Allena, who had a rather good sense of humour and kept trying to include Harry in the conversation. Ginny had been seated next to Gaynor, who was sharing the enthralling tale of her date with a vampire.

“He was really rather charming, but I was a little nervous about letting him kiss me goodnight.” The rotund woman erupted in high-pitched, trilling laughter that echoed in the large room. Ginny stared at her incredulously before giving a polite laugh and turning towards Penelope’s father to ask him some question about the restaurant.

The meal was winding down and Fred and George were both looking around anxiously. As Mr Clearwater stood, they both straightened up, looking ready to fly out of their chairs at any moment.

“Well, team. This is it. Last night before the big day. I expect you all to get a good night’s rest and we’ll see you all at the town hall tomorrow afternoon at two o’clock. Have a good evening.”

George and Fred nearly knocked their chairs over in their scramble to get up. They looked expectantly at the rest of the groomsmen. Harry stood slowly, keeping an eye on Percy, who looked none too pleased with the idea of a stag party. He caught sight of Ginny, who was being dragged out by the increasingly scarier Gaynor.

“Come on lass, we’re going to have a fun time tonight!”

Ginny caught his eye and gave him a look of horror before allowing herself to be pulled from the room.

Fred and George were pulling everyone towards the door.

“We’re going to leave from the fireplace inside the Three Broomsticks. Rosmerta won’t mind. Harry, Ron, are you sure Dumbledore won’t mind you staying out later?”

“Not at all. He said we were allowed to do what we like tonight as long as we were with an adult,” Harry answered, feeling weird calling Fred and George adults. After all, they were only two years older than he was. And he was sixteen now.

They walked quickly to the Three Broomsticks and floored without incident to the Leaky Cauldron. George quickly decided that the night would be better spent in muggle London rather than in Diagon Alley and he led the way down Charring Cross Road



They walked some blocks to a tube station. George led the group to an area known for its night clubs.

“Hey guys! This place looks pretty cool!” Carl was motioning towards a club lit up with purple and green lights. Dozens of men were streaming in and out of the club.

“Err...” Charlie stepped in, but was too late. The group was already heading in to the club.

Harry and Ron had no trouble getting in the door and within minutes, they were standing inside a posh decorated room. There were lights bouncing off the huge dance floor and disco balls hanging from the ceiling. Smoke filled the room and large mirrors reflected the mass in the centre of the room, moving to the heavily mixed music.

It was Bill who noticed first. “I don’t think we’re going to find any women here, guys. At least not any that are interested.”

Carl, George and Fred were oblivious. “Oh, come on Bill. I’m better looking than half the guys here,” George said indignantly.

“Fine, suit yourself.” Bill looked towards the edge of the room for a table big enough to suit the group. Charlie was talking to Carl.

“No, I’m telling you. That blonde is really checking you out. You should go talk to her.”

Harry watched on, bemused. He had discovered the nature of the club within two minutes of entering the room. Ron, however, seemed just as oblivious as Carl, Fred and George. He was sitting across the table from Harry, staring towards a group of women a few tables over. They were laughing and carrying on together and Ron had an unreadable look on his face.

They were all sitting for a few minutes, unbothered by the other clubbers. Carl seemed to be working up the gall to hit on the blonde, while Ron’s eyes had not left the group of women. Fred and George had quickly made their way to the bar to get drinks and Percy was sitting in the corner with his arms folded across his chest, determined to not have a good time. Only Bill was watching the other people in the club as Harry was.

Fred and George returned with a wide array of drinks. Fred handed Harry a glass with something in it and Harry readily took a gulp of it. It was a harsh drink, but for once, he didn’t seem to mind and took another drink. Fred was watching him and grinning.

“Harry, take another!” This time George was handing him something that was dark brown. He immediately recognised it as Coca Cola and rum and took another sip. The others were drinking as well. Ron had a bottle of lager and Charlie and Bill both had tall glasses in front of them. Percy, being typically like himself, was drinking orange juice, straight. Carl grabbed a shot of some clear liquid and took it quickly before shaking his head and taking a deep breath.

“Alright boys, here I go. Wish me luck.” He straightened the collar of his shirt and walked slowly and deliberately towards the blonde, attempting to hide the limp from his accident.

“Bill, he doesn’t seem to be limping that badly, why didn’t Penelope want him in the

wedding?” Harry asked quietly.

“Well, I think she was just looking for an excuse to not have him in the wedding. She doesn’t favour Carl.”

Harry just nodded. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that a young, tall male was walking towards the table. He could barely hide the smile spreading across his face as the man walked right up to Ron. Without a word, the stranger slid his arm around Ron’s shoulders.

“Hello, handsome.”

The look on Ron’s face was one Harry wished he could preserve forever. His blue eyes were large as dinner plates and his jaw could easily have been tucked into the waist of his denim jeans.

Harry felt Bill move and the next thing he knew, Bill was advancing on the man standing with Ron.

“You’ll do well to leave him alone,” Bill said menacingly as he gripped Ron’s upper arm.

“Oh, and who are you to say?” the suitor asked, his hand instantly moving to his hip.

“I’m his boyfriend.”

“You look like brothers.”

“We are.”

Harry had never seen anyone retreat so quickly and as soon as he was out of earshot, Harry and Bill both dissolved into gales of laughter. Ron, however, looked dismayed.

“Was that a bloke?”

This only increased Harry and Bill’s laughter. Ron looked at them.

“That wasn’t funny! That was a bloke! A man! Hitting on me! ME! Why?!”

“Well, I’d guess because this is a gay club,” Bill answered between laughs.

“A gay club? What do you mean?”

Bill stopped laughing and gave Ron an odd look. “What do you mean, what do I mean?”

“Well, why are we here?”

“Because Carl is secretly gay,” Bill answered, in dead seriousness.

Ron looked even more dismayed. “Does Percy know?”

“Oh yes. He knows,” Bill nodded.

“But... surely, you don’t mean—“ Ron looked horrified.

Bill looked grave. “We’ve tried to hide it from you, because we knew you’d be upset. What with Percy being your idol and all.”

“But he’s getting married tomorrow!” Ron said loudly, drawing Percy’s attention to them, as well as a few others in the immediate vicinity. A young woman in the group that Ron has previously been watching came over to the table.

“Did I hear you say someone’s gettin’ hitched?” she asked, an American southern drawl very apparent in her voice.

Ron gawped at her. “Err...yes. He is,” Ron pointed towards Percy, who was quickly going very red.

“Aww, congratulations sweetie!” The woman flounced over to Percy and hugged him tight. “Who’s the lucky man? Is he here?”

It was Percy’s turn to gawp. “Err--, um...no. No,” he stammered.

“So this is your bachelor party?”

“Uh, yeah.”

The girl squealed excitedly. Her friends moved towards the table and were quickly ordering drinks. Others began surrounding their table and soon, a large group had assembled, wishing Percy and his life partner best wishes.

As people talked and Percy turned more and more red, Harry began looking around for Carl. He spotted the bright shirt the ex-groomsman was wearing several metres away. The man was still talking to the blonde, who looked as if she was getting angrier and angrier as he spoke. Harry watched for another minute when very suddenly the young woman reeled back and landed a smack across Carl’s face.

A large, official looking man was heading towards where Carl was and in a flash, had him by the arm and was pulling him out of the building. Charlie and Bill noticed this and grabbed Fred and George while Harry grabbed Ron and Percy. They all quickly moved from the club. When they were only a few metres away, a large man (the same that had carted Carl out) was running towards them, shouting.

“Oy! Mate, you ‘ave to pay!”

George stopped and looked slightly panicked. He pulled a wad of notes from his pocket and stuffed them in Harry’s hands.

“How much, sir?” Harry asked quietly.

“Thirty-six quid.”

Harry looked amazed, but handed over two twenty pound notes.

“And you’ll want to watch out for your friend there. He needs to hold his tongue.”

Harry just nodded and took the coins the man gave him.

The group started walking along. Ron looked dismayed (Harry wondered if this was going to be his permanent face.) while Percy was as red as a tomato. Fred and George were laughing with Bill and Charlie and Carl was rubbing his swelling jaw.

“What did you say to her Carl?” Harry asked.

“She told me she wasn’t interested in guys, so I started explaining how I don’t buy that whole lesbian bit.”

“You twat,” Charlie said, having overheard Carl.

“I know. But she was giving me mixed signals!”

“What is it with women and mixed signals?” Ron said suddenly.

“Tell me about it. Always acting like they want one thing but really wanting a completely different thing,” Carl said indignantly. “Are we supposed to bloody read their minds?”

“But of course we are! We should just know what they’re thinking, and if we don’t, we’re arseholes!”

Carl nodded at Ron. “Right you are, mate. Right you are.”

Harry was trying very hard not to shout at Ron, but it was becoming increasingly difficult. Ron continued on the same tangent.

“You know what the worst thing about women is?”

“That they take ages performing simple charms to get ready to go out?” Carl replied.

“No, the worst thing about women is that they can go after your best friend without batting an eye.”

Carl was silent, as he noticed that Harry had set his jaw and quickened his pace.

“They just expect that you’ll forgive them for that. And it’s even worse when your mate goes along with it and doesn’t care about how you feel.”

“Bloody hell, Ron! You broke up last year! *YOU BROKE UP WITH HER!* To go out with someone else!” Harry shouted, losing his patience.

They all stopped walking and stared at Harry and Ron, who were now standing and facing each other.

“Oh, so that just gives you the right to be with her?”

“The right? I didn’t realise anyone had the right to be with Hermione. I’m pretty sure it’s a privilege and if you think it’s a right, then you don’t deserve her.”

“Oh and I suppose you think you do deserve her? After all, you are the *great* Harry Potter, hero of all that is wizard. We’d never want to begrudge you anything Harry. *Never.*”

It may have been the alcohol. It may have been his annoyance with the wedding. Or it may have been pent-up anger at Ron for the past few weeks. Whatever it was... it was enough to fuel Harry’s punch.

Ron reeled back, clutching his jaw. He bent his head down for a few moments, before standing up and looking at Harry. With one hand, he wiped at the corner of his jaw. He stared Harry in the eyes for a full minute, the look indiscernible. He turned his gaze away and looked at George.

“Well, then, where are we off to?”

The rest of the night was largely uneventful. They went from pub to pub, drinking and carrying on. Eventually, they even got Percy to join in on the fun. Ron kept a distance between himself and Harry but there were no more confrontations between them.

The Leaky Cauldron closed at 2am, so they started to head back around 1:30. George was leading the pack, singing an old drinking song that was definitely not of muggle heritage. Fred was leaning on Carl, who was surprisingly the most sober of the group. Charlie and Bill were talking in hushed tones about the state of the government, Ron was staring at the pavement and Percy had taken a keen interest in the starry sky. Harry trudged along next to him, occasionally pulling him out of the way of an oncoming street lamp. The world was tilted slightly to the left as they stumbled into the old wizarding pub, where Tom met them at the door.

“Fun night, lads?”

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The sun blinked brightly into the room as Harry felt something shaking. It took him a few moments to realise it was himself and the cause was Hermione, attempting to wake him.

“Harry, it’s nearly noon, you’ve got to wake up.”

“Hermione? What time is it?”

“Oh, come on,” she pulled him by the arm into a sitting position and he rubbed at his eyes, attempting to clear the foggiest in his brain.

“Ugh. I have the worst headache.”

“Well, I’m not surprised. You came in here absolutely pissed.”

He blinked, having never heard Hermione say ‘pissed’. “Pissed, Hermione?”

“Well, that’s the only word to describe it. Stumbling around, loud enough to wake the dead and mumbling something completely incomprehensible. And what happened to Ron last night? I saw him this morning when I was going to get my breakfast and he’s got this terrible bruise over his eye. Did he hit on someone’s girlfriend or something?”

“Hermione... too many words. Give me fifteen minutes ok? I’ll be out then.”

She shook her head and handed him a vial with a slimy looking orange liquid in it. “Drink that, it’ll take away your hangover.”

“Thank you,” he said, his voice dry. When she had left the room, he looked down at the vial and winced before unscrewing the cap and taking a sniff. “Oh, disgusting.” It smelled like something particularly filthy, though he couldn’t quite name it. He took a deep breath before putting the vial to his lips and taking the potion in all at once. It tasted surprisingly good, a lot like strawberries.

He took a sip from the glass of water that Hermione had also left for him before climbing out of bed. He moved to his wardrobe and pulled on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. After tying his trainers, he walked out to the sitting room to find Hermione sitting next to Ron on the couch, holding a large bag of ice to his face.

“And so this gentleman just hit you because you bumped into him?”

“Pretty much.”

Ron caught Harry’s eye then and nodded to him. Harry nodded back.

Hermione looked between them before standing up and walking to Harry. “I’m going to walk with Harry down to the kitchens to get something for lunch. Do you need anything?”

“No. Thank you Hermione.”

They walked out into the entrance hall and when they were no more than a few metres from the door to the IMS common room, when Hermione turned to face Harry.

“Why’d you hit him?”

“Wha—I—how did you know?”

“Because you two actually acknowledged each other this morning, so obviously, something happened. Why did you hit him?”

“He said some things about you that made me angry, so I hit him.”

“Ah. What did he say?”

“I’d rather not repeat it.”

“Fine. Are you on speaking terms now?”

“I don’t think so. I’d really rather not be.”

“Alright, if that’s what you want.”

“It is.”

She just nodded and took his hand as they started towards the kitchens.

After eating, time crawled slowly towards two o’clock. At one thirty, Hermione pushed Harry towards his room, telling him to clean up before heading down to town. He did so, even attempting to tame his hair. After he was clean and his hair was somewhat reasonable, he grabbed his dress shoes from the bottom of his wardrobe and headed towards the gates of the grounds. Ron was walking slightly ahead of him, carrying a broomstick over his shoulder. When Harry reached the gates, he Apparated to the appointed location in Hogsmeade where in just a few hours, wedding guests would be arriving.

He walked to the hall where the wedding and reception were being held. There was what seemed like hundreds of people bustling around (though it was probably only a few dozen), putting flowers on all the benches and adding drooping clothes around the walls. It all made very little sense to him and seemed overdone, but he merely headed to the dressing areas where Mr Clearwater had instructed him to the previous evening. He knocked on the door and heard the muffled voice of Fred calling him in.

The sight that met his eyes was something out of a movie. Percy was standing in the middle of the room wearing tights and something that looked like an oversized, long-sleeved shirt that came to just above his knees.

“Percy, is that a dress?”

“Of course not, Harry. It’s a Renaissance dress robe.”

“I think it looks like a dress too,” said Carl from his seat across the room. He looked perfectly comfortable in a set of normal, dark blue wizarding dress robes.

Harry examined the dress robes that Percy was wearing a little more. The sleeves were contrasting colours and very puffy. There was a wide belt that went around his waist and a split cape that draped over his shoulders and went down longer than the dress portion of the ensemble.

“It’s a tunic! Not a dress!” Percy said, louder than his normal tone. His face suggested murder at the next person to comment.

“Hullo everyone. How’s it hangin’? Oy, Perce, is that a dress?” Bill had walked in the room then.

“Yes, Bill. It’s a dress. And you know what the best part is? You all get to wear them!”

“But what about the robes we tried on at Gladrags?” asked Ron, who had entered the room just after Bill without Harry noticing.

“Penelope and the wedding planner decided at the last minute that we should match the overall theme of the wedding, so we have to wear these stupid...*frocks*.”

“But all those fittings?” Harry said.

“They’re being emergency tailored. Fred and George are in there right now.”

The other groomsmen sat down in various chairs spread throughout the room as Percy paced back and forth. There was a rustling in the back and what sounded like a small scuffle before a door slammed and Fred and George strolled into the room. Their outfits differed from Percy’s in that there was no cape and they were wearing odd, baggy caps.

“Good day, Harry! Good day, Ronald!” said George, bowing deeply. “I believe you two are next in Ye Merry Olde fitting room.”

“George, it’s Renaissance, not the Middle Ages,” said Fred.

“Right you are. Well, then, the fitting room is open. I’m not sure how to say that in Renaissance.”

Percy rolled his eyes at the twins and motioned Ron and Harry to the fitting room. They walked through a door to find a short wizard briskly moving around, folding bundles of cloth.

“Well, then, both of you, up on the stools. There’s no time to waste.”

They did as directed and presently, the wizard was flicking his wand about, directing coils of measuring tape about and sending bits of cloth around. He handed them each a bundle of clothing and directed them to two doors in the back of the room.

Harry sat on the bench inside the small, closet-like space, holding the clothes in his lap and wondering what exactly he’d gotten himself into. He sighed and stood up, dumping the garments on the bench. They were identical to what Fred and George had on and Harry was slightly terrified. He put on the tunic first, scratching at the itchy material. Next were the tights. He stared at them for what felt like an eternity, wondering how they worked. With a shrug, he bent down and tried to pull them on. His left foot went in ok, but as soon as he moved to pull on the right foot, he lost his balance and fell against the wall. He grunted and stood up, struggling to keep his balance as he hiked up the tights. He fell again, this time to his knees. It took two more falls before sitting on the bench and pulling on the tights that way. As he stood up, the tights in place, he heard grunting and crashing coming from the adjacent space and smirked at the thought of Ron going through what he just had. After enjoying the



moment of amusement, he tied on the cloth shoes and adjusted the strange cap on his head. After checking himself in the mirror, he walked back to where the tiny wizard was dashing about.

“Back on the stool,” the wizard commanded and Harry did as he was told. With a few flicks of a wand, the tunic was a little snugger across the chest and the tights were much higher than when Harry had first pulled them on. He stepped off the stool with a feeling of great discomfort as Ron came out of his changing room, looking harassed and beaten.

“You’re a mess. And you tore the tights! Honestly, how hard is it to put on a pair of tights?” The wizard was still scolding Ron as Harry exited the room.

Bill and Charlie went in last and when everyone was tailored and extraordinarily uncomfortable, Carl went to tell the planner that they were ready.

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Penelope’s bridesmaids were dressed in the female versions of the outfits worn by the groomsmen. They looked somewhat more comfortable in their attire though, as Harry assumed that tights were much more designed with the female anatomy in mind. He stood in line with Ginny, her arm perched on his as the music from the previous night started. He took a deep breath as the planner directed him forward.

The hall looked immensely different than it had when he first entered it three hours prior. It looked complete and was to represent some sort of renaissance thing. He didn’t know what and he didn’t particularly care. He was growing to dislike weddings more and more.

He recognised a handful of familiar faces in the crowd. Professor Dumbledore was seated with Professor McGonagall, who was sitting next to an annoyed looking Snape. He saw Hermione sitting towards the front, wearing her dress from last year’s Yule Ball. He spotted others: Mrs Weasley, Ludo Bagman, and many other ministry members. He sighed, already bored and only thirty seconds into the ceremony.

They reached the front of the room and the minister addressed the room, followed by the Ministry officiant speaking. The ceremony continued in much the same manner as it had at the rehearsal. Harry found himself zoning out as his legs grew tired and he found his thoughts wandering to a million different areas. As he thought over everything that had happened in the past few weeks, the ceremony wound down and soon, the minister and the officiant were announcing “Mr and Mrs Percy Weasley”. Harry watched them kiss and walk down the aisle.

As was directed by the wedding planner, he followed with Ginny once more on his arm and they moved down the aisle, greeting guests and friends.

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After the ceremony, they had been whisked away to some scenic spot in Hogsmeade for pictures, though it made very little sense to Harry, as it was dark outside anyhow. Then, they

headed towards the hall again, where the decorations and set-up had been changed to allow for the dinner reception. The guests were waiting inside as they all entered the room, with the exception of Percy and Penelope.

When the wedding party was seated, a voice came over the air and announced the arrival of Penelope and Percy. Indoor fireworks, magical floating balloons that propelled around the room and Ridley's Unpoppable Bubbles floated in the air as the newlyweds entered the room to great applause from the assembled guests. Dinner began and Harry spoke with Ginny and Penelope's sisters at great lengths about absolutely nothing at all. He spotted Hermione several times during the meal, seated with the Hogwarts professors. She seemed to be enjoying herself. *Probably better conversation. Then again, anything is better than Gaynor's tales of creepy stalkers she likes to call boyfriends.*

When dancing began, Harry gladly stood up and headed down to meet Hermione. She grinned at him.

"Are you having fun?"

"Not particularly."

"But Harry, you look amazing!"

"Hermione, have I ever told you how much I adore you? Really? Because it's a lot. Especially at this very moment."

"I adore your sar—I mean, wit, Harry," she grinned at him, her eyes twinkling as she wrapped her arms round his neck.

He leaned down and kissed her softly. "Hermione, should you ever decide you want to get married, can we not have a big wedding like this?"

She pulled away from him slightly and looked at him fully. "Whatever you like. But tell me; were you planning on getting married anytime soon? I don't think sixteen would fly with my parents."

He turned a deep shade of crimson and stuttered, "I...uh—that's not—I mean...err..."

She laughed, her head tilting back. "Harry, I adore you."

He pulled her back into a tight hug. "I adore you too, Mione."

She kissed him again before they heard a scuffle behind them. Harry turned and was not surprised to see Gaynor standing not too far away. She was looking at Ron and seemed to have a firm grip on his arm.

"You must know how to dance!"

"No, really, I assure you. I can't dance."

“Oh bother! If you can’t dance, I shall teach you.”

“No, no. I’m fine. I like sitting and just sort of rocking to the music. It’s very nice.”

“Nonsense. This is a wedding. You dance at weddings. And I’ll hear no more argument from you, Young Weasley.” She smiled a toothy grin and pulled Ron out onto the dance floor. Ron looked towards Hermione for help, but she merely laughed at him.

“Well, Harry? Shall we?” she held her hand out to him and together they moved to the dance floor. Harry pulled her into his arms and they danced in time to the music, talking and laughing as Gaynor pulled Ron around the dance floor.

“I really think they make a good couple.”

“Harry! She’s twice his age!” Hermione cried, laughing.

“Yeah and? Ron needs a woman like that.”

“You’re horrible you know.”

“You love me anyhow,” he said smiling, not realising his own words. He stopped and the smile vanished. He looked at her, knowing that she had realised what he just said.

“Harry. I—I’ve wanted to talk to you.”

“You have?”

“Yes. Do you think we could go somewhere else?”

Harry looked around. “I don’t see any place we can really sneak off to without someone noticing. Maybe we could go over to those settees over there?” He motioned towards a collection of settees in the corner.

“That’ll be fine.”

She took his hand and led him towards the corner of the room. They sat, a good distance apart and both folded their hands in their laps.

“Harry—“

“Hermione—“

“Heh. You can start.”

“No, go ahead Hermione.”

“Ok,” she paused, taking a deep breath, “Harry. There’s something I’ve wanted to tell you for sometime. Since before we even got together. It’s just that... Well, I was afraid to be with you, Harry, because of it. Because I worry about all that it means and I worry that we’re

young and, well, you know me. I just worry.”

Harry nodded.

“See, the thing is, Harry, I—“

If she finished her sentence, Harry didn’t hear it, because just as her lips moved, a deafening explosion went off. Harry instantly shot off the lounge and looked about. The guests had all frozen and were looking about with their eyes wide.

Another explosion, this time accompanied by a great flash of light. Harry winced as the brightness hit his head and he squinted, trying to puzzle out what was going on. His hand sought out Hermione’s, which readily grasped his.

There were shouts as the smoke from the explosion cleared and the light dimmed. Harry’s stomach plummeted as he heard someone shout.

*“Cruciatu!”*

Hermione squeezed his hand quickly before releasing it, obviously going for her wand. He did the same and in a matter of seconds, they were advancing quickly to the commotion in the centre of the room.

He saw Gaynor ducking down behind a table and Ron was not far away. A large group of burly figures was standing in the centre, wands out stretched and pointing at wedding guests.

He heard a shout from someone in the group, obviously a spell and sounding a great deal like the Killing Curse, but different. The words ended and about ten people in the room instantly fell. The closest of these was Gaynor and Harry rushed to the fallen woman, placing two fingers to her throat. The action was unnecessary, he knew, because he recognised that look.

The others that had fallen included Penelope’s dad and as Harry surveyed the room, he realised that every person that had died was a muggle and a family member of Penelope. He looked towards the bride, who was kneeling by her mother, gripping the woman’s limp figure to her chest and sobbing. Percy was kneeling by Neil Clearwater and kept looking towards his wife.

The silence in the room was unbearable. The group in the centre was standing stalk-still and no witch or wizard in the room was able to move for fear of what had just happened to the muggles.

Penelope stood after a few moments and whirled towards the group. “Who are you?!” she shouted through her tears.

“Penelope!” Percy cried out, just as one of the cloaked figures shot a spell towards the young woman. She fell instantly, but Harry could tell from where he stood that she was still breathing. Percy turned to the person who had shot the spell and fired something back at him.

It was as if someone had let a flood loose, for at that moment, every witch or wizard in the room

that had a wand began firing at the group, which Harry knew were Death Eaters. He too began firing spells at the figures, which were doing the same. He saw many people he knew getting hit by some spell or another and he saw Hermione ducking out of the way as a Death Eater cornered her, his wand outstretched. He watched as the man followed her quick movements, his wand trained on her.

“Hermio-”

And the world went completely black for what was not the first time in his life.

## **Chapter Six: Loss**

**“It is easy to take liberty for granted when you have never had it taken from you.” -M. Grundler**

Harry blinked. Twice. Three times before his vision cleared enough for him to make out the shapes in the pitch black room. He heard voices to his left as he sat up. Immediately, he realised his mistake as the room spun wildly.

“Harry?” he heard the soft voice of Hermione and instantly felt comforted as her arms slid around him. “Are you alright?”

“Hermione... what happened?”

“Death Eaters stormed the building and you got hit with just a small curse. You’ll be ok.”

“Are you alright?” he asked, his head finally clearing.

“I’m alright. Just some cuts and bruises.”

“And the others?”

“I think we better get you to Hogwarts, Harry. Are you well enough to apparate?”

“Not alone.”

“All right then, let’s go.” She wrapped an around his waist.

“Hermione, no. I need to stay and see what’s going on.”

She frowned at him. “If you need to Harry...” She helped him move around so that he could see the entire hall.

Throughout Harry's schooling, he had read of many great wars and battles. He had always pictured the battlefields in his mind as he read, trying to imagine the smallest details. Often, he had failed as he had hardly left Surrey in his life before coming to Hogwarts. The sight that met his eyes could only be described as a battle field. The room was very large, made even more so by the feelings of lifelessness now pervading it. He saw fallen figures in many places, some were dead and some were living, but he couldn't tell the difference in many cases. He noticed many of the Ministry officials bustling around trying to sort things out and an entire group of Aurors had been brought in. He must have been out long enough for the Death Eaters to flee, but not before they could inflict as much damage as possible. He heard a figure approaching from behind and nearly jumped as a hand touched his shoulder.

"Harry, I need you to go back to Hogwarts. Professor McGonagall has been injured and Snape has left for London to speak with some people at the Ministry. I have instructed Miss Granger on what needs to be done," Professor Dumbledore said, with a very serious tone.

"Sir?"

"Harry, don't ask me any questions just now. I will explain everything to you and Miss Granger later."

"Yes, professor," Harry nodded and turned to Hermione, "Ready?"

"Oh, Miss Granger? Mr Potter? You'll need to walk back to the castle, the apparition words have been placed around Hogsmeade as well. I suggest you both have your wands out."

Hermione nodded at Professor Dumbledore as Harry just looked at the headmaster. He had never seen him look so serious and so sombre. It unnerved Harry greatly and he began to wonder at the seriousness of the attack. Obviously, it was a very serious thing, but Harry wondered the exact effects it would have on the wizarding world.

When they exited the hall, Harry immediately realised what the effects would be. The village was in ruins. The spot where the Three Broomsticks had once stood was a charred, smoking ruin. Other places where Harry knew shops had once stood were in similar condition. There were ministry officials dashing about, but whether they were looking for survivors or the perpetrators, Harry couldn't be sure. He reached for Hermione's hand and squeezed it. She emitted a small cry and he looked towards her. She dropped his hand and put her hand to her mouth, tears welling up in her eyes.

"Oh, Harry..."

"Hermione, what happened?"

"I'll tell you when we get back to school. You were out for nearly half an hour. So much happened... I don't think even I saw it all."

"How many—who died?"

"Harry, I don't even know. That spell...that the Death Eater used, it killed every Muggle in the room. After it was over, he collapsed, did you see?"

“No, I was looking around to see who had fallen.”

Hermione nodded, taking his hand once more. “I just can’t believe it Harry. I just can’t.”

As they walked through the village, no one took notice of them. Hermione kept looking around, taking in the destruction and shaking her head, repeating those words, over and over: “I just can’t believe it,” while Harry took great pains to not look around, but rather at his feet. He had seen enough. The charred remains of buildings, the unmistakable smell of death and burning flesh. He was nearly sick to his stomach when he had first walked from the hall and would not make the mistake of looking around again.

They were out of the village and making their way down the road that led to Hogwarts when Harry heard a shuffling in the bushes next to him. He pushed Hermione back and took out his wand, training it on the shaking shrubbery. Hermione regained her balance and stood behind Harry, also extending her wand. They waited in silent anticipation for a few eerie moments before a figure jumped out at them.

“Hermione! Harry!” said the figure, obscured by the darkness.

“Ron?” asked Harry, recognising the voice.

“I thought I heard someone coming, so I hid. I wasn’t sure if all the Death Eaters had cleared out or not.”

Hermione nodded softly. “They’re all gone. Have you seen Hogsmeade?”

Ron bowed his head. “I saw it. I haven’t been walking long. Only a few minutes or so.”

They all stared in the ground in silence for a few moments. It was Hermione who moved first, heading towards Hogwarts at a fast pace. Ron and Harry followed, the three walking together, yet apart. The air was still, but sounds could still be heard from Hogsmeade. Harry’s mind drifted to the memories of the wedding. He felt frozen, dissecting each incident so analytically. There was no emotion to any of it. A part of him wished he had not dismissed the wedding so quickly because of how it ended. It hadn’t been that terrible. Penelope’s family may have been generally obnoxious, but they loved one another and Harry knew that that was what was needed most in the world now. He tried to prevent his mind thinking on what would happen next. War? He didn’t know. He couldn’t even begin to fathom what it would be. And he wondered who was behind it all. It had to have been Connelly, but why?

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They reached the IMS common room and parted ways, Ron heading towards a lounge and Harry and Hermione to their bedrooms. Harry sat down on his bed and stared at the wall. He sat for a few moments before realising he was still wearing the strange costume from the wedding. Autonomically, he began to undress and change in to more comfortable clothes. His vision shifted from his wardrobe to the far table. His Pensieve was sitting on the table and he was inexplicably drawn to it.

He pulled his wand from his pocket and began slowly sieving the memories into the ball. He did it slowly, watching the memory flash in the deep basin before it swirled with the rest of the contents and faded. He put each incident of the weekend in there, from the rehearsal to the attack. His need to preserve the weekend was unexplainable, but he got the feeling that it would be helpful later on.

As he was siphoning out the memory of the walk back to the castle, there was a knock on his door. He set his wand on the table and walked over to open the door. Hermione stood there, a solemn look on her face. Her eyes were rimmed in red and slightly puffy and her hair was messy. She had changed from her robes into pyjamas.

“Harry—“ she managed before throwing herself on him. He held her close, swaying gently as she cried in great, heaving, shaking sobs. They stood framed in the doorway as she cried. He felt his mind and body slowly unfreezing and a wave of pain washed over him. His thoughts ran over the attack and how Hogsmeade looked after the Death Eaters had left it. He thought of all the families that had lost loved ones, of all the businesses destroyed and all the lives ruined. He felt moisture on his face before realising that he too was crying as the raw emotion burned him.

He held her a moment longer before pulling away. “Are you alright, Mione?”

She nodded at him slowly, wiping her tears dry. “I felt terrible Harry.”

“I know. It’s terrible what happened.”

“No, no. I don’t feel terrible about what happened. I mean—yes, it was terrible and horrific, but when you went down Harry, I didn’t care about anyone else in that room. I just needed to know you were alright.”

He pulled her close again as a tear began to slide down her cheek. He whispered her name into her hair as they rocked together. After another long embrace, they moved apart again. “Have you spoken with Dumbledore yet?” he said quietly, the pads of his thumbs moving across her cheeks to wipe away the wetness there.

“He’s still in Hogsmeade. Professor McGonagall called on the fireplace to tell me we will all speak in the morning.”

Harry sighed as he nodded, pulling Hermione towards the bed. “Are you tired?”

She nodded as she leaned against him. “I don’t know if I can manage to sleep though. Whenever I close my eyes, I keep seeing them fall.”

“Do you want to stay in here tonight?”

“But Ron—“

“Hermione, let’s not worry about Ron right now. I’m worried about you and I want you in here tonight. I’m worried about you, but it’s partially selfish. I don’t think I can be alone



tonight.”

She looked at him a moment before crawling into his bed. He whispered a charm to turn the torches adorning the walls down and climbed in after her. She immediately moved to snuggle into him.

As his eyes closed and a very welcome slumber began to move over him, his mind flickered back to their conversation at the wedding.

“Hermione?” he mumbled softly, not sure if he was actually speaking the words or if his mind was only telling him he was. Silence answered him and he sighed, closing his eyes once more.

“Harry. I was going to say...” she paused, her voice thick with exhaustion.

“Yes?”

“I love you, Harry.”

“I love you, Hermione.”

He felt her move closer and he kissed her head softly before drifting off.

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Sun was streaming in through the windows high above his bed and he felt it to be a cruel gesture from nature. He closed his eyes again, an orange light burned into his eyelids. He lie there a moment longer, enjoying the warmth next to him and a feeling of contentment in his stomach. He half-sighed before remembering the events of the nights before. He groaned and stood, shaking Hermione gently to wake her.

She rolled over to the spot where he had been lying only moments before. He watched her smile softly as she stretched. The smile vanished and he assumed that she had come to the same realisation that he had.

“Harry? Did it really happen?”

He gave her a measuring glance before nodding.

“I suppose we ought to get dressed then so we can meet Dumbledore,” she said as she stood, stretching again.

He was silent as he looked at her. She noticed the look on his face. “What’s wrong, Harry?”

“Did you mean it?” he asked softly, his voice a whisper.

“Mean what?”

“When you said you loved me?”

“Oh, Harry...” Her expression softened and she moved quickly to him. He looked down at her before she leaned up and kissed him.

It was a different kind of kiss than the ones they had shared before. This was a little more urgent and there was a slight hunger in the movements of her lips. He wrapped his arms tight around her, gathering her close to him and kissed her back. The air in the room shifted dramatically and Hermione was pushing herself closer against him, her fingers winding together at the back of his head. He ran his hands down her back, feeling the soft material of her pyjamas underneath his palms. And suddenly the urge tore through him that that wasn't enough. He moved his hands down to the hem of her top and gently and tentatively slid his hands over her bare back.

She moaned against his lips and he pressed his hands harder against her, pulling her tight against him once more. Her left hand was holding fast to the back of his head while the right traced lazy circles on the back of his neck. She started moving against him, her hips sliding against his through the material of their pyjamas. He kissed her harder, hungry to taste her as much as he could.

He jumped back from her, his body beginning to tell him exactly what he wanted.

She looked at him startled, her eyes wide. They looked at each other a moment longer before her eyes resumed their normal shape and she walked towards him. Stopping a few inches away, she planted a slow, lingering kiss on his still lips before stepping back again.

“I'll meet you outside in ten, alright?”

He looked at her nodding.

She smiled at him before walking out of his room, shutting the door behind her. He watched the door close and as soon as it had clicked, he sunk to the bed, raking his hands through his hair.

He sat for a few minutes, his mind quelling the hormones surging through him. When he felt he could leave the room without making any sort of scene, he dressed quickly and left.

Hermione was seated in the common room, across from Ron, who appeared to be wide awake. There was a piece of parchment sitting on the table in front of them and Ron seemed slightly shell-shocked.

“Is something wrong?”

Hermione looked slightly uncomfortable and gave him an odd smile. “Ron has been accepted into IMS.”

Ron nodded, looking at the letter as if it wasn't quite real.

Harry couldn't seem to shake the weird feeling that he'd gotten as soon as Hermione had said that Ron had been accepted. Why should he feel weird? Ron was their best friend. And he

should be happy for him, despite everything that had happened between them the past weekend. Maybe they could work things out and they'd all be best friends again. The weirdness would be gone and—

“Oh, go on Harry. Don't look so excited about it,” Ron said, venom dripping from his voice.

Harry started and stared at the tall, ginger-haired boy sitting on the lounge. “What?”

“You seem so thrilled about it. What? Am I impeding on your precious school? Interfering with your perfect little world with Hermione?”

Harry looked bewildered, wondering where exactly this had come from. Hermione looked as startled as he felt and she was staring between the two boys.

“Well, you know what, Harry? I don't need IMS! I don't need you and I don't need Hermione!” He stood up, nearly knocking over the coffee table before stalking from the room. Hermione looked after him, her eyes the size of Quaffles.

“What'd we do?” she asked quietly.

Harry shrugged. “Sometimes, I wonder if maybe he has mood swings or something,” he shook his head, “Shall we go meet Dumbledore then?”

Hermione nodded, knitting her brows in confusion at Ron's episode.

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Dumbledore looked at them intently over his spectacles. There was no sparkle in his eyes and he was in a very serious mood.

“Forty-seven people were killed last night. Fifteen of them Muggles. Thirty of them were muggleborn witches or wizards. Two were pureblood.”

Hermione seemed puzzled by this. “Why does it matter whether they were pureblood or muggleborn?”

“I don't think I can explain that to you properly, Ms Granger. This afternoon, Minister Connelly will be addressing wizarding Britain in Diagon Alley. I have been invited to attend, as have you Harry. I don't see any problem in Hermione joining us. We're taking the train down, as it is not possible at the moment to apparate anywhere, so I would like you both to meet me in the Entrance Hall in one half hour.”

Hermione and Harry both nodded, understanding that their meeting was finished. Harry was somewhat surprised at how short it had been, but he supposed they'd speak more on the train.

They returned to their dorm rooms and quickly threw some clothing in backpacks before donning their robes. Ron didn't look at them as they walked past as his nose was shoved in a book.

Dumbledore and McGonagall were waiting for them in the Entrance Hall. For the first time since Harry had known her, McGonagall didn't have a stern air about her. She seemed deflated and her eyes were red, as if she had not slept all night.

A horseless carriage delivered them to Hogsmeade station, which was amazingly still standing. Harry was surprised by this and Dumbledore noted his look.

"The station is under the same protection wards as Hogwarts. Also, it's separate from the village enough that it was not a target for the Death Eaters."

Harry nodded his understanding as they boarded the train. Dumbledore directed them to the first cabin and the four passengers entered, a grave air following them.

They were seated and within several minutes, the train began to move. Harry had heard a handful of other passengers board the train and he assumed them to be ministry officials that had been working in the village and were now heading to Diagon Alley.

They travelled in silence. Dumbledore was staring out the window, a pensive look over his features. McGonagall was staring straight ahead, her eyes void of emotion. Hermione was picking at invisible lint on her robes and Harry was watching her.

"There will be a great change today. It shall change the wizarding world as we know it," Dumbledore said suddenly, turning to face his companions. "Hermione, what do you know of the Holocaust in Germany during the muggle Second World War?"

She shifted in her seat, apparently uncomfortable with having been singled out. Staring at her hands, she began to speak, "Adolph Hitler took over Germany and when he did, he began persecuting the Jews, Gypsies, and countless others that didn't fit Hitler's idea of a perfect human being. They were put into ghettos within their cities at first, and after that moved to concentration camps. There were all sorts of laws about what Jews could and could not do."

Dumbledore looked at her for a moment before looking back to the window.

Harry sat still, looking at Hermione who seemed to be increasingly uncomfortable. His mind ran over her words several times, recalling his history lessons from primary school. The lessons hadn't gone in depth, but he knew about the atrocities that had been committed against the Jewish people. They had been singled out and used as a scapegoat for the failing German economy. Hitler had blamed everything on the Jewish people. Harry suddenly grew nervous about the address this afternoon, beginning to think that Dumbledore had given them a clue as to what they were going to be hearing.

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The train ride was endless. When they finally arrived in London, Harry felt as if he had aged about 5 years and if his legs would never be fully under his control again. Hermione looked just as exhausted as he did, perhaps more so. They had spent the trip in silence after Dumbledore's question. Harry had remembered to pack a book and had read the remainder of

the journey. Hermione had eventually fallen asleep and Dumbledore and McGonagall both stared into the distance.

Dumbledore motioned for them to exit the passenger cabin and he led them onto Platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$ . He walked quickly through the barrier and out into the main station. Harry noticed as they walked, people seemed to step aside to make way for them, but no one looked in their direction. He found this odd as they were all dressed in robes and Dumbledore even wore one of his elaborate hats. They moved quickly and Harry was surprised to see a ministry car waiting for them outside.

When they finally arrived at the Leaky Cauldron, Harry noticed a great deal of other wizards and witches making their way through the entrance of the pub. They meshed in with the crowd. No one stopped for drinks or for a chat with Tom, but walked straight through the courtyard, where the entrance was held open to allow the steady flow of wizards and witches to pass through.

As Harry walked through the brick archway, he saw a mass of people moving down towards Gringotts. As they neared closer, he saw a podium on the main steps of Gringotts. The group stopped in front of the towering white building and Harry followed Dumbledore up towards the front of the crowd. Hermione and McGonagall were close behind. After a few minutes, the rumblings of the crowd quieted and an eerie silence descended over the entire alley.

Harry stared straight ahead as a group of wizards dressed in robes so dark they made the blackest night look blue. They collected near the podium and stood motionless, staring out over the crowd. The doors of Gringotts opened and another figure, dressed also entirely in black stepped to the podium.

The late afternoon sun caused the blond hair to glow a brilliant gold. The tall figure gave off a vibe that made Harry incredibly nervous. His scar began to irritate him, not in the pain that came when Voldemort was near, but almost as if it was an itch. He rubbed his head before letting his hand drop to the side. Hermione instantly reached for it and they waited with baited breath for something to happen.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, you find yourselves on the dawn of a new age. For centuries, the wizarding world has allowed itself to be comprised. Since the building of Hogwarts a millennium ago, the wizarding world has slowly been degrading from the glory it once held.

“Last night, a terrible tragedy occurred. Forty-seven people were killed in Hogsmeade. Forty-seven people, dead, countless others injured, and entire village levelled. This morning, right here in Diagon Alley, four people were killed. Why were these people killed? What was the reasoning behind their deaths?

“The answer may come as a shock to you, the reason may sound disbelieving. Ladies and gentleman, of those forty-seven that died fifteen of them were muggles. Not muggleborns, but muggles, who because of their muggleborn daughter, were welcomed into the wizarding world with open arms. Thirty of the victims were muggleborns and the remaining two were pureblood wizards, able to trace their wizarding ancestry back at least two generations. They were killed needlessly in what was an attack on muggles and muggleborns. Today, the four children, yes, children, killed in Diagon Alley died because one of their number was a

muggleborn wizard.

“Five pureblood wizards died in the past twenty-four hours because of their relation to muggleborns. How many more need to die before we do something to stop this? It has been rumoured that these killings will continue. I have spoken with the members of the Wizard Council. We have spoken through the hours of the night to come up with a plan to prevent this from occurring again.

“This is not the only wrongdoing against our world. We have suffered for years now. Muggleborns have taken over our businesses, they steal the top spots in our educational system from pureblooded students and now, they have caused the death of five of our number. We can stand for this no more.

“Effective immediately, we will begin implementing laws to ensure the safety of the wizarding public. Biweekly, we will be releasing two laws in order to protect our people. As I have spoken with you, members of the Ministry of Magic have posted the first set of these laws on every lamppost throughout our world. These may seem drastic, but we must protect ourselves. We must defend all that is the name of wizard. For us there are only two possibilities: either we remain Wizards or we come under the thumb of the Muggles. This latter must not occur; even if we are small, we are a force. A well-organized group can conquer a strong enemy. If you stick close together and keep out new people, we will be victorious over the muggleborns.”

Connelly stepped back from the podium and looked out across the sea of people. Harry stared at the blond man, who seemed to have noticed him and was now gazing directly at him. Close as he was, Harry could make a malicious glint in those blue eyes. And as he stared, he heard a sound that amazed him. The shock that had befallen the crowd during the speech had disappeared and was now replaced with something that terrified Harry even more than Connelly’s words.

They were applauding. In overwhelming support for the plans of the Ministry.

Hermione was squeezing his hand so tight, he thought she might pull off his fingers. He turned to look at her and saw tears welling up in her eyes. He pulled her close and looked to Dumbledore, who had never looked so aged. McGonagall retained her empty stare. Dumbledore motioned to him and they quickly made their way back to Leaky Cauldron.

As they entered the pub, Dumbledore strode quickly to the bar.

“Tom, open the fireplace. We would like to floo back to Hogwarts tonight.”

“Headmaster Dumbledore—sir—I received notice this morning that the Floo network is unavailable. I’m not permitted to allow anyone to use it.”

“Tom, I assure you, no harm will befall you or your business if you allow us through.”

Tom looked doubtful of this but Harry knew that Dumbledore was a powerful force to be reckoned with. He motioned his wand towards the fireplace across the room and waved his wand. A roaring green fire erupted in the box and he waved the group towards it.

Dumbledore strode through the flames, saying “Hogwarts” as he moved. This astounded Harry as he didn’t know that it was even possible to floo to Hogwarts. McGonagall nodded her head, indicating that he and Hermione should follow.

Harry stepped into the fireplace, feeling the green flames tickle his skin as he said “Hogwarts”. He felt the familiar spinning sensation envelop him and he pulled his arms in, shutting his eyes tight.

He tumbled onto the floor of Dumbledore’s office. Hermione came out of the box shortly after he did and Harry pulled her up, both of them turning to face Dumbledore at the same time. He looked at them solemnly as Professor McGonagall stepped from the fireplace.

“Ms Granger, why do you cry?” he said, staring directly at Hermione.

She looked at him and drew a deep breath. “I just don’t understand how he can get away with it Professor Dumbledore. What are we going to do?”

Harry’s heart was breaking as he looked at her, standing and shaking in the middle of Dumbledore’s office. She looked small and insecure, standing there alone and he moved instantly to wrap his arms around her. She leaned against him, sobbing.

Dumbledore pulled a piece of parchment from his pocket and walked towards Hermione. He handed it to her, saying, as he did so, “Painful as it may be, a significant emotional event can be the catalyst for choosing a direction that serves us--and those around us -- more effectively. Look for the learning, Ms Granger.”

Hermione unfolded the parchment and held it so that Harry could read it as well.

### **The Anti-Muggleborn Laws**

Effective immediately upon posting in public locations.

No muggleborn students will be admitted into Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

No muggleborn witches or wizards are permitted to hold teaching positions at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

No witches or wizards of muggle descent are permitted to work for the Ministry of Magic.

No muggleborn witches or wizards are permitted to own or operate businesses in Diagon Alley or other predominately wizarding areas in Wizarding Britain.

No muggleborn witches or wizards are permitted to use magic after the hour of eight pm. Anyone caught using magic will be fined.

No muggleborn witches or wizards are permitted to own magical property.

In order to insure that no muggleborns are participating in illegal activities, all written communication is subject to investigation.

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## **Chapter Seven: Challenges**

**“Mountains cannot be surmounted except by winding paths.”-Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe**

Harry looked at Hermione as she crumpled the edge of the parchment in her fist. She was seething, her cheeks red and her breathing heavy. He waited anxiously for her to say something.

“Shall I go pack then?” she finally asked, her voice icy.

It was McGonagall who answered her, finally showing some sort of emotion across her features. “Ms Granger, you are not being kicked out of Hogwarts.”

“Well, I might as well be! I’ll never be able to hold a good job; I can’t even use my bloody wand!”

“Hermione, please, calm yourself. It is not as drastic as you think,” Professor McGonagall said quietly, looking at her favourite pupil with sadness in her eyes.

“But it is Professor McGonagall! The next thing you know, Connolly will be holding us in concentration camps. He’ll begin killing us off and using our-“

“Hermione!” Dumbledore said suddenly, looking at her with a mixture of sternness and sorrow in his eyes, “I have never, in all my years of service to this school, allowed anyone to tell me how I shall run it. There is nothing that can be done to prevent Minister Connolly from disallowing muggleborn students to enroll in this school, but he will not refuse current students an education.”

Harry looked between Hermione and Dumbledore. There was an air to Dumbledore that scared him, but Hermione looked as if she would not back down.

“Professor Dumbledore, I am being denied the use of my magic. I am being denied the right to use a wand, to get a job, to do all the things that a witch should be able to do.” She held her chin high and looked Dumbledore squarely in the eye, but Harry could see that she was



shaking, whether with fury or fear or both, he did not know.

“Ms Granger. You are not being denied any of those things.”

She blinked and her mouth dropped slightly. “Sir?” she asked, her eyes moving down to scan the parchment in her own hands.

“You are not a muggleborn, Hermione.”

She stared at him, her eyes large. “They don’t know that.” Her voice was a whisper, her proud and righteous posture gone. She looked as if she could barely support herself, but Harry knew there was some invisible will that refused to allow her to collapse.

“Indeed they don’t Ms Granger, but we shall not worry about it at the moment. I suggest that you and Harry return to your dorm and discuss this recent event with Mr Weasley.” Hermione’s shoulders sagged and she nodded at Dumbledore. “Thank you for allowing me to attend the event with you Professor Dumbledore.”

Dumbledore bowed his head to her and Harry moved forward to wrap his arm around her shoulder. She moved with him towards the door and together they moved down the circular staircase. Hermione allowed herself to be supported by Harry as they walked back to the IMS common room.

As soon as they entered, Ron approached them looking worried. “Hermione?”

Hermione moved her head against Harry’s shoulder to look at Ron. “It’ll be all right Ron.” She pulled herself off Harry and moved towards the dorm, closing the door softly behind her. Ron and Harry were left standing awkwardly in the common room, both staring at their feet.

“Err, Harry?”

“Yeah?” Harry answered, lifting his head to look at his best friend.

“I’m sorry about what I said in London and this morning. But I just want to tell you... I don’t like this situation at all. I think that it’d be best if I kept my distance from you and Hermione at the moment.”

Harry was surprised by his friend’s apology. It usually took ages for Ron to even think about apologising. “Okay.”

The answer seemed enough for Ron who nodded once. “I’m heading for a walk. G’night Harry.”

“Night, Ron.”

Ron tucked his hands into the pockets of his trousers and moved towards the entrance hall, leaving Harry to go check on Hermione. He walked to her room first, but found it empty of both her and Crookshanks. He walked to his own room and found it softly lit.

Hermione was curled up on his bed with Crookshanks nestled onto her stomach. Daryl was curled near her legs and Chief Pip was lying on the pillow above her head, his own furry head resting against hers.

“Ms Hermione is very sad,” the bear said softly, his eyes moving to look at Harry.

“I know, Pip. I know.”

Hermione looked up at him and wiped a tear away from her cheek.

“You’re safe, Hermione.”

“I know I am Harry. But what about Dean? Padma, Parvati... Harry there are so many.”

He tugged off his robes before settling on the bed next door. She immediately moved closer to him, burying herself against him. “Hermione, we’re here at Hogwarts. It’s got to be a lot safer here than it is out there.” He felt her nod against him.

“Will we win Harry?” she asked, her voice quieting.

“We don’t know what we’re fighting yet.”

She sighed against him. “It all seems so sudden, Harry. I keep thinking about Dumbledore mentioning the Holocaust... but it wasn’t like that. It took years for Hitler to build power.”

“Maybe we’re missing something.”

Hermione nodded. “While I was at the Burrow, I remember Molly talking about the Daily Prophet with Bill and Charlie one morning in the kitchen. When I walked in, they stopped abruptly.”

Harry looked at Hermione’s red eyes, which had the unmistakable look of her trying to puzzle something out. “Hermione,” he said softly, wrapping his arms tighter around her, “let’s worry about it in the morning. I’m sure Dumbledore will answer any questions.”

“You’re right. I just... I can’t stop thinking about how quickly they agreed with him Harry. Why? Fear? Built that quickly?”

“I have no idea.”

Hermione tilted her head up to look at him, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. He leaned down and kissed her softly. She moved and he increased the pressure on her lips. Her arms wrapped around his neck, she shifted so her body was over his and he wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her down onto him. She immediately pulled away and sat up, moving back.

“Harry. I-I, I can’t.” She wiped at her eyes before moving off the bed and grabbing Crookshanks, he let out a meow of protest. She bowed her head, staring at the floor as she backed out of the room.

Harry stared after before turning his gaze to Pip and Daryl, who both seemed to be concentrating on anything else. He let out a groan of frustration before turning down the torches and lying back down.

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“Harry! Harry!”

He blinked before opening his eyes and rubbing away sleep. “Hermione? Is everything alright?”

“Get dressed, Harry. Hurry.”

He stumbled out of the bed, quickly pulling on a t-shirt and jeans from the previous night. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Harry. For once, I think everything is alright.”

His confusion doubled as he followed her from the room. She was moving quickly, a bounce in her step as they moved to the entrance hall. She stepped through the threshold before he did and moved to the side.

He stopped dead in his tracks as he caught sight of the oversized figure standing just inside the entrance hall. “Hagrid?” he asked, looking at the half-giant.

“‘Arry!” Hagrid walked to Harry, his steps echoing. He pulled Harry into a great hug and Harry felt relief wash over him. He had wondered where Hagrid was, but Dumbledore had never mentioned anything and the events of the previous year had been more than enough to occupy his time. He stepped back from Hagrid’s embrace and looked up to see his old friend. “Alrigh’ there Harry?”

Harry nodded, a smile spreading across his face. He turned to face the others standing in the room. McGonagall was actually smiling, Dumbledore had somewhat of a twinkle in his eye and even Snape looked relieved.

“I imagine that Hagrid is rather famished. Perhaps we should all move down to the kitchens for breakfast?” Dumbledore said, smiling at Harry, Hermione and Ron, who had just joined the group.

Without any words, they began to move en masse towards the kitchens. Ron and Hermione were chattering with Hagrid and Harry was content to know his friend was back from wherever he had been.

After they had been served their meal and the house elves had retreated to the depths of the kitchens, Dumbledore cleared his throat. “I believe it best that I explain where Hagrid has been these many months. As you know, at the end of your fourth year, Hagrid and Madame Maxime left to bring the giants round to the Light side. After many months and very difficult

negotiations, the giants have agreed to assist us should the need arise.”

Dumbledore beamed at the people surrounding the large table, exuberant over this small victory.

“Professor Dumbledore, what help will they be? They were banished years ago,” Hermione pointed out.

“True. As were many other creatures. We believe that this will help us to encourage other magical creatures, such as vampires, werewolves, and countless others to at least stay out of this battle. The less that join Voldemort’s side, the better off we will be,” he answered, smiling at her.

“What of the dementors Professor Dumbledore?” Hermione said, her eyebrow knitting.

Dumbledore frowned at this. “We believe that this is a lost cause, Ms Granger,” he replied, a tone of finality edging his voice.

Harry noticed the few others staring at their breakfast plates in curiosity. He noticed Ron perk up slightly.

“How was your trip Hagrid?”

"Very 'ard. The giants live in very remote mountains in eastern Europe and are right buggers to get along with. The negotiatin' regardin' the war lasted months and travellin' was even more time consuming. It was Madame Maxime that finally convinced 'em."

Everyone around the table nodded as Dumbledore filled them in on the giant negotiations. As the group finished their meal, one by one, everyone began excusing themselves until only Harry, Hermione, Dumbledore and Hagrid remained.

“Harry, I believe Ami and Rachel would like to see you after lunch for your lesson, rather than this evening,” Dumbledore said as the last staff member wandered away.

“Alright. Hermione, will you coming along?”

She shook her head, “I have reading to do today, which I could use your help with before you leave.”

“Lesson, ‘Arry?” Hagrid asked, his beetle-like eyes twinkling.

“Ami and Rachel have been helping me understand some of my magus powers. I believe Ami is actually going to explain some of the things I can do today.”

Hagrid nodded, beaming at Harry. “Arigh’ then. I’ll be seein’ you round.”

Harry smiled at both Hagrid and Dumbledore before leaving the table and following Hermione back to IMS.

Draco and Ron were sitting on opposite ends of the room, glaring at each other. Harry was about to ask what was going on when he heard strange noises from the dorm Ginny shared with Cadence. Walking towards the open door, he was surprised to find Professor McGonagall standing in Ginny's bedroom, her wand out.

"Professor McGonagall?" he asked, curious as to what she was doing.

"Good morning, Harry, Hermione. Did Professor Dumbledore explain to you the changes we'd be doing here?"

"Erm, no, he didn't." Hermione replied.

"He has offered shelter to many who will be losing their homes and property under the new laws. We've combined the dormitories here so that we can more easily accommodate some of the younger children."

"Younger children?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Mr Potter. There will be children who aren't yet of age to attend Hogwarts and we figured this was an excellent place to have them."

"But what about classes?"

"They will not interfere with your study time, Hermione. And you know silencing charms," she answered, turning from her work to smile at them. He then noticed that she was rearranging the rooms. There was an extra set of furniture lying on the floor, miniaturised, that she was expanding to allow for an extra person to stay in the room. This still didn't explain why Ron and Draco looked so hacked at each other.

"I suggest you calm Mr Malfoy and Mr Weasley. They don't seem to be taking it very well that they're to be dormmates."

Harry frowned as he left McGonagall to her work. Dormmates? Did that mean...?

"Potter! Move it. You need to clear your things out of there so McGonagall can add the extra beds."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, staring at Malfoy, who had cornered him as soon as he had walked from Ginny's dorm.

"I mean, clear out your things so that McGonagall can add the extra beds so that the Weasel and I can move our things in as well. You're like talking to a bloody wall."

"Why are you going to be in my room?"

Malfoy stared at him incredulously. "For someone that has so much power, you certainly are very thick. You're going to be in your room too. As the only three men in this program, we're going to share the dorm."

Harry grumbled as he walked to his own room and began moving his things about, forgetting to use his wand as he floated objects across the room. Ron walked in behind him.

“Is that the sort of thing they teach you?”

“What?” Harry asked, losing his concentration and spilling water from Daryl’s bowl, which was hovering several feet off the floor.

“Using wandless magic. Do they teach you that?”

Harry nodded. “It’s one of the things we worked on. Everyone caught on pretty quickly though. I think we did it one of the first lessons.”

“What else is there?”

“Apparation. Animagus, if you are one.”

“What do you mean? I thought anyone could do it.”

Harry shook his head. “You have to have the magical ability to do so. Hermione and I are the only ones in the program who are Animagi.”

He heard Ron mutter “Of course,” under his breath, but chose to ignore it. “Have you spoken with Arabella?”

“I’m meeting her this afternoon. She said she had some preliminary tests to do and some things to work with me on. Apparently, I have some work to do before school begins.”

“I’d imagine so. We covered a lot that wasn’t covered in fifth year.”

“Is it hard?”

Harry turned to look at his friend, hearing the trace fear in his voice. “You’ll be fine, Ron. The one thing I learned this year is listen to Hermione. Studying is an extraordinarily necessary in this program.”

“It’s always been necessary.”

“No, trust me. You’ve never learned how to properly appreciate colour-coding.”

Ron winced. “Is Hermione harder to work with now?”

“Not at all. She has a lot more books at her disposal now, so the information we tend to need isn’t as elusive,” Harry smiled, thinking about their quest to find information about the Philosopher’s Stone in first year, “so she doesn’t get as frustrated.”

“There’s a relief.”

“Will you help me here?” Harry asked, moving aside his heavy trunk and noticing that he had

a lot left to clear away.

Ron nodded and slid his wand from his sleeve. Together, they moved Harry's things quickly and before long, McGonagall and Malfoy were standing in the doorway. Professor McGonagall set down two small sets of furniture. Two desks, two wardrobes and two beds.

Harry frowned again, wondering how all of this would fit in his room. His curiosities were answered as McGonagall began chanting. The walls and floor began to shift and stretch and Harry found himself standing in a room close to the size of his old dorm in Gryffindor Tower.

"Will that do?" she asked the assembled boys.

"It'd do well if you added some walls," Draco replied.

"Professor Dumbledore said you are all to share. Increased safety precautions."

"I'm more likely to accidentally be hexed than I am murdered in my sleep sharing a room with these two!" Draco replied, looking far less collected than Harry had ever seen him.

"It might do you well, Malfoy," Professor McGonagall replied absentmindedly as she began enlarging the pieces of furniture, which she quickly placed around the room. "You're set then. Enjoy." Her cool smile made Harry frown again as she bustled from the room. The three students stared at each other before Draco turned and raised his wand at the bed tucked in the far corner. Immediately, a light gray duvet appeared on the bed, as well as a set of heavy curtains. He pulled a small trunk from his pocket and enlarged it before floating it over to rest near the foot of the bed.

"It's all colour-coordinated," Ron pointed out. "Did your mum teach you how to do it or did you read it in Witch Weekly?"

Draco flicked his hair out of his eyes with a quick wave of his hand. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Daryl and Pip chose that moment to tear into the room, followed quickly by Crookshanks. They immediately charged onto the bed with a dark gray chest on the end.

"Get your animals out of here, Potter," Draco said slowly, staring at the wrestling, wriggling mass of fur on his bed.

"They live here!"

"Not while I'm here," Draco drawled.

"Maybe you could sleep on the lounge," Ron offered.

"Maybe you two could share it. Then I won't have to bear witness to your...yes, well, you know what I mean."

Harry raised his eyebrow. "What are you on about?"

Draco frowned at him, obviously not sure what his insult meant exactly. His frown deepened and he pointed to the animals currently tearing apart his duvet cover. "Just get those filthy animals out of here, Potter!"

"They aren't filthy Draco. And they listen," came a soft voice from the doorway. Crookshanks, Daryl and Pip immediately stopped their scuffle and hurried across the room to meet Hermione. She bent down and pulled Crookshanks into her arms, kissing the top of his head. "If you ask them to move, they will. Harry took away Pip's nightstick, so there's no danger of any sort of retribution. But, I will keep them with me until you get settled in here." She smiled at all three of them before turning and walking from the room, calling Pip and Daryl after her.

They were alone again. Ron shrugged and went to the bed that was left unclaimed. He too pulled out a trunk and settled it by the foot of his bed. "I have some work to do before lunch, are you two planning on staying in here?" he asked.

"I'm not," Draco replied before stalking out of the room.

"Has he always been that...odd?" Ron asked, looking after their blonde dormmate.

"Only in the past year or so. He can be a bit flouncy."

Ron shrugged, apparently satisfied by this answer.

"I'll clear off so you can work. Talk to you later," Harry said, backing out of the room. He immediately went to Hermione's room.

Her door was slightly ajar and he heard some scuffling noises. Opening it, he found Hermione on the floor, laughing and playing with the three pets she had evacuated from his dorm.

"Will it be difficult?" he asked her.

"Will what be difficult?" she said after her long moment, her breathing staggered.

"Rooming with Ron and Malfoy."

"I'd imagine infinitely so." She grinned at him before standing up and brushing herself off and moving so that he could envelope her in his arms. "You're welcome to stay in here," she said, her grin increasing.

"Oh?" he replied, a grin spreading over his face.

"Sure, we can make you a nice bed on the floor." Her eyes twinkled as she watched his face drop. "Oh! You should see the look on your face," she giggled, "I don't mind you being in here at all. But won't they tease you about?"

"Probably. But that's why I know silencing charms."



“I think McGonagall meant we were only to use those for studying...”

“How will she know?”

“I suppose she won’t. Maybe we could put a silencing spell on these three,” she motioned towards Daryl, Pip and Crookshanks. Daryl was watching on Pip taunted Crookshanks with a piece of string he had got a hold of.

“Might not be a bad idea.”

“Especially with all the reading I need to do today.”

“For what?”

“I’m trying to find out more about magic so that maybe we can understand that journal. I wish that I could hear it being spoken.”

Harry nodded. “That’d make it infinitely easier, I’m sure.”

“Perhaps I could have you read-- wait a minute. Your Pensieve. Wouldn’t it be in your Pensieve?”

“You’re right. It would.”

“Could I use it?”

Harry nodded. “I’ll get it. It’d probably be better to keep it in here anyhow, with Draco and Ron being in my room now.”

Hermione nodded. “I’m sure that Ginny and I will be much more civilised about the whole thing,” she replied with a wink.

Harry rolled his eyes as he walked back to his dorm to collect the Pensieve. Ron had drawn the curtains on his bed, so he quickly grabbed it and walked back to Hermione’s dorm. Setting it down on the desk, he turned to her. “Will it ever be normal again?”

She looked up at him, immediately understanding what he meant. “I hope so. I really do.”

“I do too.”

She picked up her wand and walked towards the Pensieve. Lightly stirring the contents, she peered at him. “Will you join me?”

He shook his head. “I don’t want to see it again. I’m not ready yet.”

“Well, then, I’ll see you in a bit.” She moved her head closer to the marble basin, and Harry watched as her figure became completely still, hovering over the Pensieve. Figuring her journey would take awhile, he pulled one of the books Hermione had set aside closer to him and settled on the bed to read.

*He was floating. In a cloudless, blue sky. There was no visible sun, but a warm, soft yellow light washed over him. He felt himself calm greatly, the pressing matters of wizarding politics and school and Hermione were washed away by the light. He sighed, content with his thoughtlessness. So content was he, that he didn't even notice as he began to fall, slowly and aimlessly, much like a fall leaf.*

*"Harry..." a soft voice came to him through the empty sky.*

*"Hm?" he replied, his eyes partially closed and his ears barely registering the sounds directed towards him.*

*"You must find it, Harry. Help her to find it."*

*He opened his eyes a bit. The light surrounding him had changed to a vibrant orange and the blue sky was deepening to an intense gray. "Find what?"*

*"Help her, Harry."*

His body slammed down and when he opened his eyes, he felt himself laying on Hermione's bed, a large book open in his lap. Hermione's figure was still unmoving and the animals had settled into a heap in the corner of the room. He shook his head, trying to remember the dream. What is even a dream? It didn't feel like a dream.

A movement from Hermione pulled his attention towards her. He was anxious to see her response to the events stored in his Pensieve.

She stood, wobbling a bit, before turning to him. Her face was ashen and tears were streaming down her face.

"I forgot how terrifying it was...being there in the graveyard. At the time, I was so focused on you... and getting away from there, I didn't remember the details. I didn't remember watching you... it's like I blocked it out," she sobbed as he held her. Her body was trembling as she mumbled to herself.

Pulling back, he wiped her tears away. "You've been crying too much lately, Hermione. I wish I could take away everything that causes you to cry."

She looked at him, her eyes bright and rimmed in red. "Do you mean it?"

"Of course. I love you, Hermione. And I hate to see you hurting."

She wrapped her arms around him, hugging him tight. "I love you."

He hugged her tighter, breathing in the smell of her as his heart ached for what she had seen.

"Erm, sorry to interrupt. But, erm, it's time for lunch and I wanted to see if you wanted to walk down together," Ron said from his place at the door.

Harry and Hermione pulled apart. Harry straightened his robes and Hermione sniffed and wiped her eyes. "Sounds lovely, Ron." She gave him a small smile and he nodded, walking into the lounge to wait for them.

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The bright sunlight from outside lit Hogwart's dark corridors as he walked, his footsteps echoing loudly. He heard no sounds as he neared the classroom and began to feel unease at the lack of laughter. Immediately, he wondered what they had to laugh about. Rachel was probably worried about Hermione, as the wizarding world knew her as a muggleborn and Ami was probably sharing in her friend's worry.

They were huddled around a desk, a Daily Prophet laid out in front of them.

"I honestly don't understand what these rules are supposed to accomplish. Of course, it doesn't surprise me that everyone agreed to them. It was only a matter of time..." Rachel trailed off as she noticed Harry standing in the doorway. "Hullo, Harry."

"What rules were issued today?" he asked, his cheery mood quickly Disapparating.

"The one about no muggleborns working for the Ministry and no owning of shops or other businesses in wizarding areas."

"What other wizarding areas are there? Hogsmeade has been completely destroyed and Diagon Alley has mostly pureblood owned shops doesn't it?"

"Nearly every major city in Britain has some wizarding area to it, though most are quite small. Those shops and businesses are owned mostly by muggleborns. I believe there are Diagon Alley-like areas in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, Birmingham, Newcastle, Leeds, Cardiff, Belfast ... Every place has some magic to it," Ami answered, smiling.

"What did you mean when you were saying it didn't surprise you Rachel? Hermione and I were both shocked. It doesn't seem like what happened in Hogsmeade was justification for this."

Rachel knit her eyebrows. "You mean you haven't heard about all the other things going on?"

"Other things?"

"Yes, many wizards and witches bearing any connection to muggleborns have been mysteriously murdered over the past several months. Just a month or so ago, there was a great round-up of people that have non-human blood in them. Half-vampires, half-werewolves, selkies, so many creatures. I have all the articles from the Daily Prophet in my quarters."

Harry paled. "Would half-giants be included in that?"

Ami tilted her head slightly, looking at Harry with an odd expression on her face. "I suppose

they would. Are you worried about Hagrid, Harry? He'll be fine, I'm sure, being safely out of Britain." Ami patted his hand lightly and gave him a small smile.

His eyes widened briefly before he shook his head. "He's not out of Britain, he came back this morning."

"But he is here at Hogwarts?"

Harry nodded. "He's with Dumbledore, I believe."

"He should be safe then. Hogwarts is the safest place in wizarding Britain."

"Are you alright then, Harry? We have a lot to cover today."

"I'm fine. We can start."

"Excellent. Rachel has explained much of the history to you and a lot of the theory, but I want to start with the practice. You have a great deal of power at your fingertips, Harry. We've seen your capabilities as an Animagi and we know how talented you've become at using wandless magic. There is so much more though. I've told you about healing, mind-reading, time travel. All of those things are powers you can access if you work hard enough. Each of them requires a bit of practice, but once you grasp exactly what you need to, your power will be unlimited. Hermione has the ability to read minds, as you know, and that required no training whatsoever. I want to find out what you can do.

"The first thing I'd like to try is healing. I'm going to use a simple spell to create a small laceration on your arm, and I want you to heal it."

"But how?" Harry asked, looking between his forearm and his aunt.

"You know how."

"And if I can't?"

"Then a simple spell to clear it up," she replied, smiling at him.

"Alright," he pulled the sleeve of his t-shirt back and winced as he felt a small slice in his arm. He thought back on his first dream last year, when Tristram had inadvertently told him how to get out of his cell. Concentrating his mind energy, he focused on the wound on his arm. After a few moments of screwing his eyes shut, he opened them and peered at his arm to find a thin trail of blood running slowly down his arm.

"Hm. Obviously, that's not it."

Harry frowned.

"Oh, don't worry. That's supposed to be an easy one to learn. I read about it. Once you learn to focus your mind properly, you'll have no trouble. This next one will be easy to test."

Ami picked up a corner of the Daily Prophet and scribbled something on the corner. "I'm thinking of a number. What is it?"

"Are you serious?"

"Yes. What is the number?"

Harry raised his eyebrow, feeling as if his aunt was completely mad. "Seven."

"Did you guess that or were you able to read my mind?"

"I guessed."

It was Ami's turn to frown. "I'm thinking of a word."

Harry looked into Ami's eyes, focusing on the intense, swirling blue patterns of her irises. He waited. And waited. "Nothing."

"Well, then that pretty much leaves us with one thing, but I'd like to try anyhow. I want you to go back to one hour ago. To this very spot."

Harry blinked. "One hour ago? Back in time?"

Ami nodded slowly. "To this very spot. Like rewinding a video tape."

Harry knit his eyebrows, concentrating on his surroundings, imagining what they would have been like one hour ago. As he focused, the strangest sensation overcame him. His eyes began to feel a slight pressure, his body feeling as if he was running backwards. A great jolt surged through him and he closed his eyes.

"What in the hell?"

Harry opened his eyes and found himself looking at Charlie Weasley and Viridian. "Er, hullo, Charlie."

"Harry? What are you doing here?"

"Er...I was working on some apparition with Ron. Sorr- wait a minute, what are you doing here?"

"I came to see Viridian for lunch."

The Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher looked very red. She smoothed her hair back and straightened her robes, her blush increasing as she noticed Harry watching her.

"Right then, must get back now." Harry closed his eyes and concentrated on the room as it had been when he left it.

Ami grinned at him when his eyes opened. "Well done. Amazingly done. I can't believe it

worked. It did work didn't it? You didn't just Apparate away?"

"No, I found Viri-- well, let's just say I went back an hour."

Ami grinned and hugged Harry. "That's amazing! So astounding! I just can't believe that my nephew can travel through time--"

"Ami! Harry! Mum!" called a voice from the doorway.

"Hermione?"

"We need to get to the entrance hall, quickly. Something is happening. We can Apparate"

"You can't Apparate inside Hogwarts, Hermione."

"Mum, fine. Harry and I will Apparate and you two just run there."

Harry looked briefly at Hermione before she disappeared with a faint *pop*. Following her lead, he appeared in the entrance hall, completely unprepared for the site that met his eyes.

Hagrid was being held on the ground by ten men, dressed completely in black robes. Minister Connelly faced Dumbledore.

"This...thing is unfit to teach here. Not only is he a mudblood, he's half-giant. He will not be teaching the young witches and wizards of Great Britain."

"No one has ever told me how to run this school and I will not start letting someone now."

"Take him away."

A man pulled away from Hagrid and pointed his wand at him. "*Imperio*," he said lowly, his voice nearly a growl.

Harry watched in horror as Hagrid stood, slowly. He nodded once to Dumbledore before lumbering slowly out of the castle, three or four of the robed men following closely behind.

"You can't do that Minister Connelly! Imperius is illegal."

"Dumbledore. Your star mudblood would do well to hold her tongue."

Connelly turned on his heel and exited the castle, followed by the rest of his cronies. As the doors slammed behind him, Ami and Rachel tore into the entrance hall, staring disbelievingly at Harry and Hermione.

"You can't Apparate inside Hogwarts!" Rachel said, staring wide-eyed at her daughter.

Ignoring them, Harry turned to Dumbledore. "Let me go back Professor. I can stop this. I can save him before anything happens."

“You know I cannot let that happen, Harry.”

“But it’s Hagrid Professor Dumbledore! He can’t go back to Azkaban! He can’t,” Harry’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“I’m sorry, Harry.”

## **Chapter Eight: Darkness**

**Evil is unspectacular and always human, and shares our bed and eats at our own table.-**

W.H. Auden

Harry sat on a lounge in the common room, watching out the window as the horseless carriages pulled up to the castle. The first day of term. Normally, he was thrilled for the beginning of the year, anxious to see his friends and even to start classes again. It was different this year. The day was dark and stormy, just like the mood in the air. He had watched for the past two days as carriages had begun arriving at Hogwarts, bearing witches and wizards, young and old. Some were dressed as muggles and others in robes, but they all shared a common look. He saw the same fear, confusion and loss on nearly every face that entered the doors of Hogwarts.

Dumbledore had asked for their assistance the first morning people arrived and he and Hermione had spent the majority of their last few days before term began helping people find their way around the castle, assist the teachers in casting protection wards or just doing other tasks assigned to them.

Harry had helped haul in luggage and helped people get settled. He’d heard lectures from several of the older wizards about how different their world was today than it used to be and how in their day, they had to make their own wands (which he knew wasn’t true, but he nodded to placate them.) The morning of the second day, he and Hermione had been charged with about twelve kids while Ron was asked to help McGonagall with room arrangements. They spent the morning outside with the children, trying to keep them from snooping near Hagrid’s hut and clear away from the Forbidden Forest. Eventually, he had brought Pip and Daryl out to play and ended up keeping all twelve of the children occupied for several hours.

After Hermione had taken them in for the evening meal, he had stayed outside more, watching as Snape worked near the gates of the school, casting charms. He had turned towards the school for a brief moment when he noticed that there was an odd fuzzy light shining in the windows. Looking closer, Harry had realised that there were charms over the window to prevent anyone from being able to look inside. Sighing, he’d led Daryl and Pip back inside, realising that Hogwarts was going to be a very different place.

In evenings, he dedicated his time to Hermione, who still had a room to herself. They spent

most of their time, cuddling on the bed and talking, Hermione usually half-paying attention to the discussion topic and half-paying attention to one of the books sprawled in her lap. She had taken several books out of the library on languages after spending ample time in Harry's Pensieve, copying down bits of Mage.

At night, they slept in her room. Only Draco was sleeping in the dorm as Ron had taken to the sofa in the common room. When they were anywhere near each other, they tended to bicker and Harry had taken great pains to avoid them, just as Ron was avoiding him.

Last night, he and Hermione had stayed up until it was nearly light up discussing everything from how to deal with Ron to the newcomers to the castle. When dawn was beginning to shimmer through the drops of dew on Hermione's windows, they had drawn the curtains and gone to sleep.

He had awoken late morning, finding Hermione still curled against him. He had kissed her gently on the forehead before slipping out of her bed and going to his own dorm to change into his school robes. After getting food from the kitchens and taking up one of Hermione's books, he had settled himself near the windows to watch and wait.

Three boats streamed across the violently churning. He knit his brow as he watched a tall figure lead the students into the castle. Standing and straightening his robes, he stood and turned, seeing Hermione.

"Shall we head down?" she said quietly, looking discontented that the other students had arrived.

He nodded.

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The cacophony of noise settled to a low din before becoming completely silent as Dumbledore stood from his chair at the head table. Harry looked around the room, feeling out of sorts at the situation that presented itself. Instead of four long house tables, there were about eight shorter tables in the room. As he looked from table to table, he noticed that many familiar faces were not in the room and they were replaced instead by witches and wizards of all ages. There was a table full of young children dressed in both wizarding robes and normal street clothing. A table in the far back of the room was occupied by older witches and wizards who looked weary and bothered and were only half paying Dumbledore any attention. There was the IMS table, close to the head table. And the fourth new addition was occupied by witches and wizards in their twenties and thirties, who wore mixed expressions of amusement and worry. He recognised a great deal of the new faces and was even waved at by a few of the children. He smiled at them briefly before looking back to the head table.

"This year will be the most difficult in memory. Due to current events in our wizarding world, I have opened the doors of Hogwarts to muggleborns and to any wizarding families that feel they need sanctuary. However, a great deal of students have been pulled away from Hogwarts. There will be many changes to your class schedules. Though you will still be living in your individual houses, there will no longer be separate classes," Dumbledore said, his voice



echoing in the large room. He paused, judging the reactions of the students. Harry peered around, seeing that it was only the Slytherins who were most bothered by this latest news.

“The largest change is, of course, the younger students in this building. Many schools around Britain that educated young witches and wizards were operated by muggleborns. Several schools have been shut down for that reason and others have been closed because the students were often children of muggleborn witches and wizards. In an effort to continue the education of these children, the other professors and I would like to ask for any volunteers from the fifth, six and seventh years to assist in the program we have developed. If you are interested in volunteering, please speak with your head of house.

“Now, if that’s enough announcements, let’s begin!”

Harry’s stomach grumbled as the normal Hogwarts’ feast appeared on the table. He quickly began spooning mashed potatoes and vegetables onto his plate, happy that things were at least somewhat normal. He smiled at Hermione, who looked somewhat shell-shocked.

“Is something wrong?” he asked, a concerned look in his eyes.

“There was no Sorting Ceremony.”

Harry blinked before he realised that she was right. There had been no ceremony. He noticed a handful of new faces among the house tables, but he couldn’t be sure whether or not they were first years. As he was about to mention this to Ron and Ginny, Arabella strode towards them.

“After the Feast, I’d like to have a meeting with all of you. I know that many of you have some house duties to attend to, but there are some things we need to discuss, so I need you to return to IMS as soon as possible.”

“Arabella, why was there no sorting ceremony?” Harry asked, looking at the blonde witch.

“No need for it. There are only twelve first years. They were sorted before coming in here.”

“Twelve?” Hermione said, looking even more shocked than she had a few moments prior.

“Indeed. We aren’t permitted to allow muggleborn students, so the enrolment numbers are significantly lower.”

“I never realised there were so many muggleborns,” Ron said through a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

“Of course there are!” Hermione responded, looking exasperated. “More than likely, half our housemates are muggleborn or half and half or have muggleborn parents.”

“What does muggleborn parents have to do with it?” Ron asked, looking at Hermione strangely.

“If a witch or wizard doesn’t have at least two generations of wizardry, they’re considered a

muggleborn,” Arabella answered him.

“Arabella, what’s happened?” asked Cadence, looking confused at everything that was going on.

“We’ll discuss it all later, I promise. Right now, I need to get back to the staff table and I believe the Prefects are going to start leading the few first years there are back to their houses in about ten minutes.”

Harry looked down at his half-empty plate, his hunger lost. Absentmindedly, he twirled his fork through the vegetables in front of him as he listened to Ron question what the big deal about all this was. Eyeing Hermione, he saw her biting the inside of her cheek and focusing intently on the piece of chicken on her plate. Clearing his throat, he looked at the red-haired boy in front of him.

“Oy, Ron. Why not let off that topic of conversation for now? Arabella said we’ll discuss it all later.”

Ron looked at him strangely before nodding and returning to his dinner. Harry tapped his fingers on the table and looked around at the other diners in the Hall. The conversation was minimal and the air in the room was heavy. Sighing, he turned back to his own plate and half-heartedly began to eat part of a roll. Shortly thereafter, his hunger diminished and he noticed that others were beginning to finish their meals and file out of the Great Hall. He waited for Hermione and Ginny to finish before he walked towards the Gryffindor table and asked for the first years to follow.

It didn’t take long to get the two girls and two boys settled in to their dorms, as they were now in the same tower.

“This seems a bit ridiculous. Why is Dumbledore housing people in IMS and in Gryffindor? I bet he didn’t put anyone in Slytherin,” Ginny said as she followed Hermione into the girls’ dorm, which was directly across the hall from where Harry was directing the boys.

“I’ve no idea. It seems silly to have the boys and girls in the same tower. What’s to prevent, well, you know?”

Ginny shrugged as they shut the door, her reply lost on Harry. He turned to face the two boys standing in front of him. “What did you say your names were?”

“Richey,” replied one of the boys as the other replied, “Nicky.” *Twins*, thought Harry as he looked at the identical Gryffindors.

“Right then, you’ll be staying in this,” he opened the door, “room.” The dorm was much smaller than the dorm he’d shared with Neville, Ron, Dean, and Seamus. There were two beds, facing each other, with the trunks positioned at the foot of each four poster. “Should you need anything, the Prefects are just a few flights up, or you can reach Hermione, Ginny, or I by the communication device I showed you downstairs.”

The twin on the left nodded.

“Do you need anything or have any questions?” Harry asked.

“We’ll be fine. Thanks Harry!” said the other as Harry began backing out of the room. They seemed settled enough as he closed the door.

Ginny and Hermione were standing in the hall, waiting for him.

“That was easy,” he said to them.

Hermione nodded. “This is all so strange. It’s not right. Hitler took years to get this sort of thing happening. It feels as if this is all over night. I mean, honestly, twelve new students this year? Twelve! Four of them are Gryffindors. I wonder what the other houses have?”

“Slytherin has two, Hufflepuff has three and Ravenclaw has three,” Ginny replied.

Harry shook his head as they began descending the stairs. “That’ll be hell on Quidditch.”

“Quidditch?” Ginny asked, looking bemused.

“Of course. Dumbledore has decided that there will be Quidditch this year,” Harry replied.

“That seems like a brilliant idea!” said Hermione sarcastically. “We’ll just group everyone in as big an area as possible so it’s easier to kill them all!”

Harry gaped at her. “Hermione!”

“Shh, keep your voices down,” Ginny said, looking between them both. “Let’s wait until we’re out of Gryffindor Tower before we start talking about massacres.” She shook her head as she quickened her pace, mumbling to herself for the duration of their descent.

As soon as they were out of the portrait hole, Hermione immediately picked up where she’d left off. “I think it’s ridiculous to have Quidditch! I mean, how dangerous is that? We’re harbouring these muggleborn witches and wizards to keep them safe from Connelly’s people, yet Dumbledore is going to allow Quidditch? As if flying around on broomsticks 50 feet off of the ground isn’t dangerous enough, you’re going to do it in front of a group of spectators that are targeted by the government. Brilliant!”

Harry stopped dead in his tracks and stared at her. “Hermione, do you even understand why he’s allowing it?”

“How do you know so much about it?” she countered, turning to face him and crossing her arms in front of her.

“McGonagall asked me to captain the Gryffindor team,” he said, his voice low.

“And you’re going to do it?!” she looked equally mortified and angry.

“Of course I am! I’d do anything to get back out there on my Firebolt!” He began walking

again, wishing to get back to his dorm as quickly as possible so that this argument could be finished.

“That makes no sense! It’s dangerous and stupid. You’ll get killed out there. Connelly will have his men here to take out the muggleborns before you can blink. Dumbledore is allowing everyone to use wands here, Harry. There are wards up all over the castle to protect everyone inside, but the minute they step outside and use any magic whatsoever, they’ll be found.”

“Hermione, we need Quidditch. It’s to take everyone’s mind off of what’s going on out there. I’m sure Dumbledore will make sure that no one uses magic on the pitch. I don’t want to fight about this, Hermione.”

“Harry, can’t something else be done to occupy people’s attention? Isn’t there something less dangerous and less stupid?”

Harry stopped walking again. “Don’t call it stupid, Hermione. It’s not. I, for one, am all for Quidditch being reinstated because it allows me to get my mind off of school, off of this damn war and off of you!”

Hermione’s mouth dropped. “Off of me? And what have I done to warrant such frustration?”

Harry sighed. “That came out wrong.”

“Fine then, Harry Potter! I guess I’ll go find something to take my mind off of you as well!” She stormed off in the direction of the entrance hall.

He stood in the same spot for a few moments, looking at Ginny, who looked completely taken aback by the scene she had just witnessed. Looking at her shocked brown eyes, he sighed. He turned in the direction that Hermione had gone and jogged after her.

Turning a corner of the hallway, he found her leaning against a wall, tears streaming down her face. “Hermione?” he asked, cautiously, standing a few feet in front of her.

“Did you mean it?”

“Not the way I said it. Last year, I would have given anything to be out on the Quidditch pitch, flying laps, just because it would have allowed me to think about anything but you. Not that I didn’t want to think about you, but I felt like I couldn’t. Right now, I don’t want to get my mind off you. Not now or ever.”

“You mean it?”

“I do.”

“I’m sorry, Harry, for saying that Quidditch is stupid. I just can’t shake the feeling that something bad will happen.”

“It’ll be perfectly safe, Hermione. Dumbledore will have aurors there.”

“Can we spare aurors? Shouldn’t they be out helping in other things?”

“I don’t know if there’s much they can do now.”

“I’m sorry, Harry. I really am,” she moved closer to him and he enveloped her in his arms.

“I am too, Hermione. I’m so sorry,” he said quietly against her hair. She looked up at him, her brown eyes bright with unshed tears. His heart melted at the fear in her eyes and his immediate reaction was a desire to take away the pain there. He kissed her, gently at first, before the need to kiss her encompassed him fully. She adjusted herself so that she was pinned completely against him, nearly every inch of their bodies touching. His fingers travelled from her lower back to fist in her hair, the soft curls entwined around his fingers as their tongues collided. He breathed her in, the need to touch and feel every inch of her pounding through his body. She moaned against his lips and he felt his knees weaken. His fingers moved from her hair, travelling down her back to her hips. Gently, he pushed her away a few inches and looked into her half-open eyes.

“Hermione?”

“Harry...” she answered, her voice a low moan.

“I want you, Hermione,” he said, looking into her eyes.

“Right here?” she replied, her voice barely a whisper. The confusion in her voice washed away his immediate need of her and he laughed.

“I love you so much.”

She grinned at him. “I love you too.”

Ginny conveniently came around the corner at that moment and grinned at them. “All kissed and made up then?” she asked, a bemused look on her face.

“Right, don’t we have to meet with Arabella?” Hermione responded.

Ginny grinned again and the three set off towards IMS.

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The other seven members of the program were seated in the common room, surrounding Arabella, who looked exhausted.

“Did you get that whole huge group of Gryffindors settled in?” The sarcasm in her voice was thick enough to spread on toast and made Harry immediately want to hide.

Ginny and Hermione nodded as they took chairs with the rest of the group.

“Good. There’s a lot that needs going over tonight. I need to talk about this school that

Dumbledore is holding for the young ones as well as what we'll be covering this year, but first I feel it important that we all talk about everything that has been going on. I know most of you have been out of the loop this summer, so I'd like to start by answering any questions you have."

Cadence immediately spoke up. "Why are all these people here?"

"Very good question. I suppose I'll start at the beginning then.

"Just over a year ago, as you all know, Voldemort returned, which is one of the reasons this program was even started in the first place. When word of his return began to get around, the wizarding economy in Britain began to drop and many businesses closed. In addition to the poor economy, there were a lot of things happening in the wizarding areas. Pureblood witches and wizards were being murdered and it's largely believed that this was due to their association with muggleborns. About two weeks ago, Connelly introduced the muggleborn laws, which restrict all sorts of things. Because of this, many witches and wizards lost their property and businesses, their jobs and their ability to do magic. That's why they're here."

"But why so many?" asked Padma.

"Well, there's a bit of a clause. You have to have at least two generations of wizarding blood, meaning that both your parents and grandparents must be wizards. That narrows down the purebloods quite a lot, as immediately following the Great War, there was an influx of muggleborns into our world. However, they were all students. So many of the students here have wizards as parents, but not grandparents."

"Why isn't anyone helping us? Where are the other wizarding governments?" Hermione spoke up next, her question being met with many nods from the other students.

"Well, just as muggle governments vary in power and size, so do the wizard governments. The American minister was ousted from his seat about six months ago, and the new minister, Gary Johnson, is going along with every Connelly suggests. Calanthe Reine, the French president, is refusing to adopt any of Connelly's regulations, and she's backed by several other governments. She's also offered asylum to any magical creatures that are in danger of being taken by Connelly."

Harry frowned, remembering that Dumbledore had mentioned that Hagrid had left France to come back to the UK. *If only he'd stayed...*

Shaking himself, Harry turned his attention back to Arabella who was discussing the people staying at the castle.

"I'm sure many of you are wondering why they're all housed in the school Houses or here in IMS when there are plenty of rooms available in the rest of the castle. We've decided that this is the best method of protection and though it may take time to get used to, it will work out better in the end.

"There are twenty-two students that will need magical education and I'd like some volunteers. As of yet, no students from the other houses have volunteered, so I'm thinking of making it

mandatory unless a few of you volunteer.”

Harry felt Hermione nudge him as she raised her hand slightly. Sighing, he followed and saw that Ginny and Padma were doing the same.

“Any others?” Arabella said after she nodded at the four students volunteering. Waiting, she looked around the room. “Very well then. Ron, Draco, you’ll be helping as well. After we’re finished here, I’d like to speak with the six of you.”

Draco and Ron were staring at each other angrily and Harry fully understood the meaning of ‘If looks could kill’.

“On to our program,” Arabella said, interrupting the glares of Ron and Draco, “This year is going to be vastly different from last year. We’ve covered all the basics. I’m fully confident that each of you could fight against any member of Voldemort’s legions and hold your own. However, I don’t believe that you’re fully aware of what could happen in such a fight. We spent last year discussing how the Dark Arts was integrated into many different branches of magic. You understand what can be done and how, but you don’t understand why. You know how to fight, but not what you will be fighting.

“Your studies last year were an expedited version of your final three years of Hogwarts, plus some advanced work. Some of it, you were familiar with, some of it you had already learned and some of it was as foreign as Sanskrit. You’re all at the same level now. This year, we’re going to begin a true study of Dark Arts. You will learn a history of it, you will learn of past leaders of the various groups that have perpetrated the Dark Arts in our world and you will learn how to perform many of the Dark Arts because that is the best defence. A Death Eater will not come after you with a tickling charm; they aren’t that patient, nice or humorous. You’ll be lucky if they ever offer you a duel, because their best weapon is Avada Kedavra.

“We’ll also spend several weeks breaking down the Unforgivable Curses. At the end of the year, your final exam will be to write and perfect your own spell, be it curse or otherwise. However, it must be something useful to defending yourself against the Dark Arts.”

Hermione’s hand shot up. “How long will we have to work on these?” she asked before Arabella even addressed her.

“Well, the assignment will be given six weeks prior to the end of term, but you have as long as you like before then to start working on it. After Christmas, I’m going to begin instructing you on breaking down charms into their working parts. What makes what happen. As we discussed in the past, magic is so much a matter of will, but for something as powerful as say, a counter to Avada Kedavra, you need an incantation of some sort to channel that will. Not that I expect any of you to try a counter to Avada Kedavra.”

Padma Patil looked up from the notes she was copying done and raised her hand as well.

“Yes?”

“Are we going to be studying anything else this year?”

Arabella smiled at her. "Of course. The first thing we're going to be studying this year in time travel."

Harry's head shot up as he stared at his teacher. She winked at him before continuing on. "It's time for everyone to retire to their rooms. Are there any problems with the dorm situations? Yes, Cadence?" she asked, responding to the girl's hand.

"Um, time travel? Like time-turners?"

Arabella shook her head. "There are other methods."

"But are they legal?" asked Cho, speaking up for the first time during their meeting.

"Not necessarily, but then again, there are few Dark Arts that are legal. It's not a question of legality, but necessity. You need to have every weapon available to you. It will make you smarter fighters. I don't think I need to go into how this is going to help you in light of recent events."

A few heads around the room nodded as Padma cleared her throat. "Speaking of magic, how are we muggleborns to use it?"

Arabella smiled softly. "I was waiting for one of you to ask that. Dumbledore has placed special wards around the castle. They don't block magical detection, as that would appear suspicious, but they don't allow specific detection of who's performing the magic. Dumbledore will not allow Ministry officials into the Castle, so it is highly unlikely that anyone will be caught."

"Won't people notice that their neighbours are gone?" asked Akilah.

Arabella shrugged. "People notice what they chose to notice. Now, are there any dorm problems?"

Both Draco and Ron put their hands in the air.

"Other than you two. You'll have a problem if I keep you in the same building, so you might as well grow used to it. Now, if there are no other questions, I need to see my volunteers," she grinned as she said this, looking directly at Harry and the other students who were going to help. As soon as the others had left, she turned to face them. "It's rather good the six of you are helping, as you're all rooming together. There are three age groups: ages nine through eleven, six through eight and four through six. I'd like Hermione and Ginny to take the youngest group and Ron and Draco to handle the oldest."

"What exactly are we supposed to be doing?" Ginny asked.

"Well, a few professors have outlined and drawn up a great deal of work for these younger students. You'll need to implement that. A bit like glorified tutoring. I have names of the students you'll be working with, as well as timetables showing when you'll be meeting with them."



“But what exactly are we going to be teaching them?” asked Hermione.

“Well, some minor potions. Not anything like you learned in your first year, but more fun things. You’ll teach them how to brew different sweet potions so that they’ll have fun, as well as learning the basics of brewing. The older groups will be learning the basics of Latin so that spells are easier. There will be history. I’m sure there are other things...” she trailed off as she shuffled through some pieces of parchment in her lap. “Here, these are the timetables and curriculum.” She handed each student a few pages.

Harry looked through the sheets, quickly scanning over the timetables and the lessons. The group that he and Padma would be working with required lessons in Latin (of which he knew little), potion brewing, some history, minor spell casting, and a few different types of games. He folded the papers and tucked them inside his robes as Arabella stood up.

“I didn’t want to mention this, but you will all be receiving credit for this. I may exempt you from final exams, but I haven’t decided yet.”

A collective sigh of relief arose from the students as Arabella bade them good night and walked from the common room, leaving them standing in the common room.

Harry shuffled awkwardly as he looked at Hermione. Ginny noticed the odd tension in the group first.

“Perhaps we ought to head to our dorm so we can sort everything out,” she suggested, nodding her head towards the door.

Hermione, Padma, and Ron nodded and they all followed Ginny towards the room. It had been expanded some to allow for some extra furniture in the lounge and Harry knew their bedrooms had been expanded, but having all six people in the room made it seem much smaller. Everyone seated themselves in the various chairs and sofas around the room before Ginny began talking.

“I think maybe we should work out some sort of privacy type thing. A sock on the doorknob or something.”

“What for? There better not be any shagging going on!” Ron said, looking indignant.

Ginny raised her eyebrows at her brother. “I meant for studying or if someone is napping or something.”

“Oh.” Ron had the decency to look sheepish as Ginny rolled her eyes at him.

“Maybe we could just use locking charms on the doors, and if they’re locked, knock. If they aren’t, that means that no one is in there or there’s no need for privacy,” suggested Hermione.

Everyone nodded, except Draco, who looked annoyed at having to be in the room at all.

After a few more minutes of awkward small talk, Padma announced that she was tired and was going to bed. Draco and Ron nodded and both stood to head towards the boys’ dorm. Ron

bumped against Draco at the door, who frowned.

“Watch it Weasley. No need to be so anxious to watch me change into my pyjamas.”

“Sod off, Malfoy.”

Draco glared at Ron as he shoved the red-headed boy out of his way. Ron grunted, swearing, before he walked into the dorm room.

Ginny followed a few minutes after Padma, leaving Harry and Hermione by themselves on the sofa.

“I wish it didn’t have to be this way,” Hermione said softly, linking her fingers with Harry’s.

Harry nodded, bringing her fingers up to brush his lips over them.

“I hate the idea of not being able to sleep in the same bed as you anymore.”

Harry smiled softly. “I can always sneak in. We can close the curtains, put a silencing charm...”

Hermione grinned and playfully hit Harry’s arm. “I really did mean sleep. We talked about this.”

Harry smiled and leaned closer to her. “I know, Hermione.”

She leaned in more and kissed him gently. “I love you, you know.”

“I love you too. I better head in and pretend like I’m going to bed. I’ll be in soon?”

Hermione frowned slightly. “How will you sneak in?”

“Apparate?”

“That works. Just don’t, you know, apparate on me.”

“I’ll try.”

“Harry...” she grinned again, shaking her head.

“I’ll see you in a bit love,” he replied, kissing her once more before standing up.

She squeezed his hand slightly before letting it go. He winked at her before walking towards his dorm.

The room was dark except for a single torch dimmed in the corner. The curtains on both Ron’s and Draco’s beds were drawn and Harry walked quietly to his wardrobe to find his pyjamas. Feeling slightly self-conscious at sharing a room again, he slipped into the bathroom to change.

A few minutes later, he was in his own bed, the curtains shut tightly behind him. Wondering exactly how he was going to apparate into Hermione's bed without splinching himself, he crossed his fingers and shut his eyes.

He instantly felt soft arms slide around him. Opening his eyes, he saw a curly-haired resting against his chest and he wrapped his arms around Hermione. "Miss me?" he said coyly.

"Yes, you were gone hours." She looked up at him, grinning sleepily.

He moved under her covers and she snuggled closer to him, burrowing against his side.

"G'night Harry. I love you," she said softly, her voice already sounding sleepy.

"Night, Mione. Love you too," he replied, knowing that she didn't hear his answer.

He slid an arm around her and moved closer, closing his eyes and breathing in the scent of her as he drifted off.

## **Chapter Nine: Lessons**

**I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.- Mark Twain**

Harry took in a deep breath, inhaling the scents floating in the gentle breeze coming off the lake. It was a warm afternoon, unusual for autumn and Padma had suggested they take the students outside for their lesson. It was their second week of lessons, and their final lesson of the week. They met with the young children Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays for two hours in the afternoon and had been assigned a variety of things to study. They had quickly divided up some of the subjects; Padma had offered to instruct them in a few basic Latin and History lessons and Harry was going to be teaching them charms and potions. Everything else they would be sharing.

Padma smiled at him as she conjured a blanket and spread it out on the lawn under the unusually warm September sun. Seating himself on the blanket, Harry glanced at the group of children slowly making their way towards the spot near the lake where they had spread out. They were moving quickly, anxious to see what their instructors had in store for them today. Monday, Harry had taken them to the dungeons to show them the objects used in potion brewing and Wednesday, Padma had began instructing them on Latin. Today, they had been promised a special treat.

"Michael and Renee, sit please, I want to begin," Padma said, her voice soft, but authoritative. The two students did as they were asked and looked expectantly at Harry and Padma, who were seated next to one another and facing the cluster of children. "How many of you have

pets at home?"

Every hand went up as Padma began waving her wand delicately in the air, tracing something in blue light. "How many of you have one of these?" Again, six hands shot in the air as the image of an owl appeared before them, its wings flapping slightly. Harry looked in slight admiration at the fluttering creature. Its form was a dull blue outline, which some points illustrated more brightly, much like a constellation. He turned towards Padma, who was smiling as she looked through her drawing towards the students.

"Animals have been vital to the wizarding world for centuries and they're no less important today than they were one thousand years ago. Even with the invention of such communication as Floo, we still rely on animals for communication and even travel. But why do we use the owl for communication? Why not, say, a pigeon?"

Six small faces looked at her expectantly as she drew another flying animal in mid-air. Nearly as quickly as the pigeon appeared did she wave her wand and it disappeared, replaced once again by the fluttering owl.

"Many animals that are familiar to us all have specific characteristics that help us to decide whether or not we should depend on them. Most of the animals that you see daily aren't magical. I'm sure many of you have dogs and cats and fish and maybe even birds at home. These aren't magical creatures, yet many witches and wizards believe that these animals possess a bit of magic that makes them unique."

A little blonde girl named Bailey raised her hand. "My mum told me that when she was little, all the other kids thought black cats were bad luck."

Padma nodded. "Many muggles believe that black cats are bad luck. This is because for as long as witches and wizards have been around many of them have used cats as a familiar."

"What's a familiar?" implored a red-headed boy (whom Harry thought looked strikingly like Ron) named Rodney.

"A familiar is what we use to connect us to the animal world," Harry replied, beginning to understand where Padma was going with her lesson. "They can be very helpful with certain spells and such."

Six faces looked at him blankly as Padma stifled a giggle. "Harry's quite right. You'll learn a lot more about familiars in the next few weeks when we begin to talk about spells, but for now, I'd just like to focus on the animals themselves. Many animals are just companions to wizards, they aren't always used in magic. I want to talk about three different animals with you today. They're special animals though, ones you won't necessarily have at home."

Harry smiled to himself as the children squirmed about, moving in closer for the lesson. He snuck a look at the parchment that had the notes on the animals they would be discussing. Padma nodded to him.

"How many of you have seen a spider?" he asked, his voice shaking a little. The four little girls in their group squealed and moved closer together while the two boys perked up and

raised their hands excitedly into the air.

Grinning, Harry continued, "They're usually pretty small right? And creepy and crawly?"

The other little boy, Michael, grinned. "I like to catch them and put them on my sister. She hates spiders," he grinned again as the girls whimpered and looked at him horrified. Rodney laughed and offered his hand to the other boy, who high-fived him.

Laughing, Harry shook his head. "My friend Ron is terrified of spiders. In second year, we had to follow a whole bunch of them into the For-- well, into the woods and he was going mad the entire time. Don't tell him I told you though. There were hundreds of them, crawling along the ground," he said, making a motion with his hand along the blanket.

A few of the children hid their giggles behind their hands as one girl looked scared. "Don't spiders bite?"

Padma moved closer to the girl. "Spiders are very friendly and they hardly ever bite, but they do...tickle!" she said slowly, tickling her fingers along the girl's arm. The others laughed and the girl, Emma, giggled. Harry laughed with the rest of the group, appreciating how good Padma was with the students. She had quickly developed a comradery with the whole group and they would often surround her on days when they didn't have lessons, begging her to play games with them. They often would chase down Harry too and he was glad that he'd volunteered to help with their lessons.

He looked at the paper again. "Alright, so you're all familiar with spiders, but what if you saw a really big spider? Bigger than a Daddy Long Legs?" Six sets of eyes grew very large. "In the Americas, there are these huge spiders called Tarantulas--"

"My older brother had one of those once, but our puppy tried to eat it, so mummy made him get rid of it," said Renee, looking very important.

Harry quirked his eyebrow at Padma who winced. "Right. So you know how big they are."

She nodded. "It was huge. Like the size of a dog."

Padma giggled. "Alright, well, they aren't quite that big, but they're bigger than anything we have in Britain. They're special animals though. Many witches and wizards use their legs in potion-brewing, but they're also kept as pets."

"My mum has one for the garden, she says in the spring it keeps the bugs away," said Rodney.

Harry nodded and continued. "Aside from being good in the garden," he answered, not sure if that was really true, "they're good companions, loved by witches and wizards for their ability to hide and their ability to defend territory. That's probably why your mum likes having one in the garden. They can be trained easily and are usually friendly."

Padma smiled at him as she took up the lesson. "Cats are pretty common household pets too, right?" The children nodded. "But what about big cats?"

"Like lions?" asked a little girl, Chloe, her eyes wide.

"Sort of. The cat I'm talking about is an over-sized black cat: a panther."

"They have one at the zoo in London!"

"Yes they do Emma. I went to see her last summer. She was very friendly towards me, which surprised the keeper. He was getting upset because she kept coming so close," she smiled at the students, who were grinning and laughing. "Witches especially love panthers, they tend not to get on well with wizards," she nodded towards Harry. "You know how blokes can be," she winked noticeably to the group of still giggling girls, only increasing their giggling. "In ancient times, many wizards killed panthers because they were associated with darkness and women, but in some societies they were loved and cherished. They aren't kept around today, but many witches still have some bond to any panther they come across, even in the zoo."

Harry looked at the watch on his wrist, amazed at how quickly their lesson had gone by. "We have one animal left, guys, and we're done."

They quieted their giggles and looked at Harry solemnly. Padma began tracing an image of the last animal in the air. "The last animal is very much mixed. Some love it, some hate it. Most associate it with darkness and death, but it does have many good qualities. Some Ravens can be tricksters, but others are teachers and very very smart. Ravens are known to be healers and protectors."

"Are all these animals familiars?" said Emma, looking confused as she stumbled over the word.

"Familiars?" replied Harry, nodding, "Of course. They all have their own special powers."

"Like us?" asked Rodney, jumping to his feet as Harry and Padma began to stand up.

"Sort of," answered Padma, ruffling his red hair. He pushed her hand away, laughing and ran off towards the castle, the others quickly following after him. Harry helped Padma fold up the blanket before they started off quickly to catch up with the kids.

After making sure they were with their families for the evening meal, they headed down to the dungeons to gather the materials they would need for their potions next week.

They were going to be teaching them how to brew a drink much like butter beer that only involved a few ingredients and a cold flame. When Snape had shown them how to make it, he'd been surprised by the use of a cold flame, having never used one before. Padma had laughed at him, telling him that the potion was a lot like American powdered drinks. He had nodded, not sure what she was talking about.

"They're great. It could be worse and they could be absolute horrors," she said as they trudged down the stairs.

Harry nodded. "Definitely. It's a nice break from all the Dark Arts stuff."

"Yeah, I know. It's hard to fathom sometimes why anyone would ever want to use those spells. Arabella said the guy that invented Avada Kedavra wanted to be rid of his wife, but couldn't because of wizarding laws."

Harry grimaced and nodded. "It's very hard to believe that people are so dark, but they are. I'm glad we're learning how to actually fight here, though. Fire with fire and that sort of thing."

"I supposed you're used to it though."

He shrugged. "Maybe. I wish I could escape it all though. I ask myself sometimes, why I am the way I am. Why I'm a magus and why I survived. I didn't do anything."

"You don't know that... there was something about you that wasn't the same."

Harry sighed and opened the door to Snape's dungeon. "We'll never know I guess. I've seen him face to face four times and he hasn't told me."

She blinked. "Four times? I imagine I'd die if I looked at him once."

He choked out a dry laugh. "I doubt that."

She shrugged and scooped some of the ingredients off the shelf. "Monday will be fun."

"What is it we're making?"

"Well, it's a lot like Kool Aid."

"Which is?"

"It's this drink they have in America. It's like coloured, flavoured sugar. I loved it."

"When were you in America?"

"Parvati and I have an uncle there, he works at a hospital in New York City. We spend a holiday there every year with him and his family."

"What's it like?"

"New York is wonderful, but we went to Disneyworld one year over Christmas. They didn't even have snow."

"Wow. We never had much snow over Christmas in Surrey, but I've grown rather used to it."

Padma nodded. "I like spending the holidays here now. It's nice."

"I can't imagine not being at Hogwarts over Christmas."

"Last year, my parents wanted us home, which is understandable. What about your family?"

Harry thought of Ami and Sirius before he shook his head. "The Durselys are terrible. They want me away as long as possible," he answered, feeling odd because he hadn't thought of the Durselys in so long.

"Some families can't appreciate what they have I suppose. I have three little brothers and sisters. I was hoping they'd get to go to Hogwarts eventually, but it doesn't look like it."

"How do your parents do with magic?" Harry asked as he helped her carry cauldrons into the small dungeon they would be using for the rest of the term.

"They think it's wonderful actually, but they weren't surprised. My mother said she noticed something different about us since we were babies."

"It might change, maybe this will be over sooner than we think," he said quietly, thinking about upset he'd be if he was a muggleborn. He blinked. Arabella had said that it was two generations. His mum was a muggleborn. "Wait a minute," he said, stopping mid-way through setting a cauldron on a table.

Padma paused, looking at him strangely. "What?"

"I should be considered a muggleborn, shouldn't I?"

"Your parents were both wizards."

"Right, but Arabella said it was two generations."

She shrugged. "You're the Boy Who Lived. He wants people to go along, not hate him. I don't imagine they'll come after you."

"Are you scared?" he said, feeling oddly comfortable asking her this question.

"Being scared isn't an option. I have other things I could be doing."

They were finished setting up for Monday's lesson and she turned to him. "I've got Quidditch practice in forty-five minutes, so I better run."

"So do I. I'm glad to be playing again. See you around."

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"Harry?" came a voice from the girls' dorm as he closed the door to the lounge.

"Hermione?" he replied, recognising her voice instantly.

She walked into the lounge, a look of concern on her face. "Where were you?"

"At the lesson with Padma," he answered, looking at her oddly.



"It was scheduled to be over nearly an hour ago." She was frowning now.

"I know. We set up in the dungeons for Monday's lesson."

"You were in the dungeons?"

"Yeah... are you alright?" he knit his eyebrows as he said this, concern in his eyes.

She shook her head slightly before forcing the corners of her mouth up. "I'm fine."

"You're sure?"

"Of course."

"Did you eat yet?" he implored, deciding to believe her and change the topic.

"I was waiting for you," she replied, her voice soft.

He looked at her for a few moments before crossing the gap between them and gathering her in his arms. "Tell me what's bothering you Hermione," he whispered as he looked down into her eyes, seeing every emotion in them. He was surprised to see worry and fear. "Hermione," he said, drawing out her name as she remained silent, just looking him.

After a moment, she stepped away from him and walked towards her dorm room, beckoning him to follow. She held the door for him, closing it as soon as he had passed through and placed a locking charm on it.

He sat on her bed and she joined him, linking her fingers with him. "Tell me I'm being stupid," she said softly.

"For what, love?" he held her hand tighter.

"I feel so stupid. I promised myself I'd never be one of those jealous girlfriends," she said, bowing her head to stare at their joined hands.

"Are you jealous of Padma, Hermione?" Harry asked, disbelieving of what he was hearing.

Hermione nodded solemnly. "A bit. I'm sorry. I don't know why."

He faced her fully, cupping her face in his hands. "Hermione, I love you and you have no reason to be jealous. Padma is just a friend of mine."

"I know, Harry. But I feel like since the year has started, we've not had any time together. I miss being able to snuggle into you at night."

He kissed her gently and nodded. "I miss it too. I can't sneak in every night. Ron and Malfoy would notice."

"Why do you continue to call him Malfoy?"

"Why do you call him Draco?" he replied, raising his eyebrow, but keeping his tone light.

She shrugged. "He saved our lives, Harry. It feels weird to call him Malfoy after that."

"Is that why you're so friendly with him?" His tone grew a little darker.

It was Hermione's turn to frown. "I'm not friendly with Draco, Harry. I just see no point in being rude to him," she answered, scrutinising him. "Are you jealous?"

He sighed, shaking his head. "No. I'm sorry. Can we change the topic?"

She shook her head and let out a light laugh. "Not in the mood for a State of the Relationship conversation?"

"It doesn't seem necessary. Everything is fine between us, except for a slight smattering of jealousy on both our parts. As long as we remember that we do love each other, it'll be fine."

She nodded and kissed him again. "You know, given the choice between having you to myself and dinner, I think I'd rather starve."

"You're sure?" he grinned, "I can't have you wasting away to nothing."

"I think I can skip this one meal," she replied, grinning and leaning in for another kiss.

He answered by giving her a deeper, longer kiss than his previous ones. She scooted closer and wrapped her arms around him. He held her close, drinking in the taste of her that he admittedly had not had much of the past week. She seemed as eager as he did, quickly deepening the kiss. After a few moments, he pulled her into his lap and she nestled against him without breaking the kiss. Their kiss deepened and as Harry began tugging at the clasp on Hermione's robes, she moved to kiss his neck, just below his ear. She shrugged the robes off as Harry loosened them and moved her own fingers to begin taking his robes off.

Soon, they were wearing only muggle clothing. Hermione was wearing a skirt and sweater, while Harry was wearing jeans and a long sleeved t-shirt. They immediately moved closer again, Hermione's fingers tracing circles just below the hair line on his neck, which was slowly driving him mad. She moved once more into his lap and he winced slightly, having grown considerably more aroused when they had shed their robes. She seemed to notice and adjusting herself accordingly. After a few more long moments of kissing, she pulled back slightly and looked him, her breathing a little heavier than normal.

He watched her intently for a few moments, his eyes tracing over every feature of her face. He took in her eyes, the fear and worry replaced with a very intense desire that could only be described as lust. His eyes moved over her nose, focusing on her lips, the bottom of which was being nibbled on every so slightly. His breath caught in his throat as he watched her teeth move against her lip and he quickly moved to capture her lips again. He felt her smile slightly before she melted into the kiss, her lips opening under his. He slid his tongue against his lips, which was met with her own. He felt her body pressing against his and he laid back, pulling her on top of him. She stretched out, nearly every inch of her touching him as his heart

pounded in his ears.

His hands moved over her back to the hem of her sweater. He paused and hearing no resistance, slid his hand under her sweater.

They both gasped slightly as his cool hand touched the warmth of her back and desire raged though him. His hand travelled up her spine as they continued their kiss, her own hands roaming over him. Suddenly she pulled back and looked at him, smiling. He grinned at her, surprised when she tugged his glasses off gently.

"I rarely get to see you without these while your eyes are open. Your eyes are amazing, you know."

He blinked, not having much trouble seeing her, but still feeling strangely naked without his glasses. "Your eyes are beautiful, Mione."

"Really?" she whispered as she moved to concentrate on his neck again.

He only nodded, his other hand sliding under her sweater as well. They moved upwards until hitting the band of her bra. She said nothing as he slowly began to fumble with the hook, taking a few moments to actually unhook it. Still no protest from her as his hand moved awkwardly and tentatively around to her front. She adjusted herself as his hand brushed tentatively over her breast. He felt a breathy moan against his neck as his hand began to gently massage her breast. His mind exploded with want as she nibbled lightly on his neck and he pressed his hand harder against her. He nearly whimpered as she felt her moving away and when he opened his eyes, he saw her beginning to tug off her sweater before lying back on the bed and he moved with her, settling his weight onto her only partially. She tugged on the collar of his shirt, pulling him close to kiss him. His hands immediately moved to discard her bra before his hands settled once more on her breasts. He felt her hands pulling at his shirt before it was quickly tugged over his head. He shook his head before kissing her once more, their hands roaming simultaneously. Suddenly, there was a loud knocking on the door.

"Hermione? I need in there, I have to be at the Quidditch pitch in ten minutes."

Harry and Hermione sprung apart and scrambled to get their clothing. "Just a minute Gin," Hermione said, her face glowing red. Harry handed her robes as he pulled his around him, kicking his t-shirt under the bed. She tossed them aside, tugging on her sweater. As soon as it was over her head, she chanted the incantation to unlock the door and tried to fix her messy hair. Ginny opened the door as soon as the unlocking charm clicked and eyed the occupants curiously.

"Are you ok?" she asked, looking slightly concerned at her two friends.

They both nodded, looking equally flustered. She smiled at them before grabbing her broom from behind the door.

"See you on the pitch, Harry," she said, nodding as she closed the door behind her.

Hermione and Harry looked at each other as soon as she had left, eyes wide. Shifting

uncomfortably, Harry cleared his throat.

"How far would that have gone Hermione?" he asked softly.

"I--I'm not sure."

He scooted closer to her and took her hand again. "What do you want Hermione?"

"I love you, Harry, you know I do, but I don't think I'm ready for this."

He nodded and kisses her gently. "Then you set the boundaries alright? If it gets too far, stop me."

"But what do you want?"

"I want you and I want to show you how much I love you. But I'll wait for you Hermione."

She smiled then, slightly and kisses him gently on the lips. "Thank you, so much."

He smiled at her and stood up. "I'm off, love; we have to meet with the players first, so I'll see you on the pitch in about twenty minutes."

She nodded. "Good luck, then."

He closed the door after him, sighing in frustration.

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Harry looked at the people gathered around him. McGonagall had asked him to captain the Gryffindor team and last week she had given him a list of names of students who were going to be trying out. Both Ron and Ginny were trying out for the team and even if they both made it, that left three open spots on the team. He looked at Katie Bell, who also had a copy of the list. She sighed and turned to face the team.

"Alright, here's the deal, I have a list here of all the people trying out. Come up here, put what position you're trying out for on the line, and head out to the pitch. There are two Chaser positions open, two Beaters and a Keeper. Let's go," she said as she set the parchment down on the table in front of her.

The twenty or so students lined up to sign the paper and one by one, they marched out of the locker rooms and towards the pitch. Harry and Katie waited until everyone had entered their position before peeking at the sheet.

"Four for Beaters, two of whom are girls. I don't think Gryffindor has ever had female beaters before."

"Who are they?" Harry asked, peering at the sheet.

"Gertrude and Beatrice Jones. Second years."

"Who else is trying out?"

"Ten for Chasers, three for Keeper and two for reserve Seeker. Or first seeker," she remarked, grinning at him.

He returned her smile. "I'm up for a challenge and at least we have a lot to choose from then."

Katie nodded. "I hope they're good though. I'd like to win the cup this year."

Harry nodded as he followed Katie out to the pitch. The group was flying low laps around the pitch, already separated into the groups for the different positions. Katie called for them to land and they all circled round.

"As I said before, there are five spots open for the team, however, I would like to keep on an additional seven for the reserve squad." She narrowed her eyes at the players. "I want the twin beaters over here. Michelle and Tim, I'd like you as the chasers. Ron, Keeper." She pointed to the players she'd picked and motioned them off to the left. Running her eyes over the rest of the group, she picked out an additional seven. "We're going to do a practice match and half-way through, we're going to rotate. Both sets of beaters will stay in, but switch sides. Then, the extra keeper will come in to play on my team while Ron switches to the other side. The extra five keepers can switch however they choose, as the first group will be rotated in."

They nodded and the first group she selected mounted their broom. Harry saw Hermione in the stands, holding his omnoculars and a whistle. She was going to be refereeing, perse, but she was going to be assisting with the recording of the match.

He hovered about the pitch, watching the reserve seeker out of the corner of his eye. Hermione released the quaffle, bludgers, and snitch into the air as her whistle blew and the various players took off. Harry trained his eye on the Snitch for a few moments before it disappeared. He moved his eyes to watch the game going on below him. The other team had the quaffle and one of the female chasers was speeding quickly towards the goalposts. Wincing, he watched as a bludger went zooming towards the chaser, hit by one of the twins, Beatrice. The chaser dodged her shot, still holding the quaffle. Speeding up, she aimed and tossed it right through the goal, past Ron.

The game continued as Harry kept an eye on who he thought to be promising prospects. Ron was doing terribly at Keeper, but he was surprised to see that at the other end of the field, Ginny was holding her own, also playing as Keeper. Another Chaser prospect that he had noticed early on was playing extraordinarily well, but having a difficult time keeping up with Ginny. He'd had four attempts at a goal, but had only scored once.

After about twenty minutes of playing, Hermione blew the whistle. As the other players began to switch in, Katie called out, "Ginny, I want you to stay in, but move to this side." That was the only change and Harry looked down towards Ron, who was skulking on the side of the field. They continued playing and as Harry watched the game, he noticed the reserve seeker that had come in was now zooming towards the far goal post across the field. He narrowed his eyes, searching for the Snitch. A faint gold glimmer caught his attention and he pushed his

broom down, aiming right for the goal post. In a matter of moments, he caught up with the seeker, who had spent most of the match simply tailing Harry. They sped towards the ground at an alarmingly fast pace, Harry amazed that the seeker was able to keep up with him for the most part. Soon however, he lost his momentum and Harry dived closer, quickly grabbing up the Snitch and signaling the end of tryouts.

The group landed on the field and moved to the side, all looking at Katie with anticipation. She looked to Harry, who faced the group.

"We've taken shots of each of you with omnoculars. We're going to review that quickly and discuss a few things before we let you know. It should be about twenty minutes. If you'd like, you can go shower and change and come back. We'll be set by then."

Harry and Katie walked towards Hermione, who was waiting off to the side. "There are some excellent players out there," she said as she handed the omnoculars to Harry. "I'm going to head in, I've got some reading to do. I'll see you later." She kissed him on the cheek and started back towards the castle.

"Thanks Hermione," he called after her. Katie pulled him towards the benches and they sat down, putting the omnoculars into focus. She pulled a small notepad out of her robes and looked at him expectantly.

"There were two chasers I thought were excellent. The first was that third year, with the blond hair."

"Laura?"

"Right. The other I saw was that fourth year, Ian. He was playing well against Ginny, even though he couldn't score against her."

Katie nodded. "I saw. I definitely want Ginny."

"She was excellent; I was surprised."

"I'd never seen her play before, had you?" Katie asked, scribbling the names down on her notepad.

Harry shook his head. "Never. Now, I think that those two twin girls would make the best beaters. They seem to work well as a team."

"I agree, although the one guy, Patrick, seemed to have a stronger hit than Getrude."

"I think the one-mind aspect of Beatrice and Gertrude is to our advantage though."

"True. That was what made Fred and George so excellent. Ok, now, reserves."

"Well, we've got the beaters. I don't feel confident enough in Ron as a keeper though. The other one, Charlie, was good though."

"And the Chasers?"

"Those three girls that played for the other team in the second round."

"Gemma, Erin and Jenny?"

"Right. The reserve seeker should be the one who played in the first round."

Katie nodded and scribbled on her pad. "Alright then, that was easier than I thought."

Harry smiled at her and they stood up, as the other players were beginning to come back. They quickly made the announcements for the teams, leaving most people quite happy. However, Ron made a point to glare very sharply at Harry before he stormed off towards the castle. Harry sighed and gathered his things, anxious to get back and be with Hermione.

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He took a long hot shower before heading back to IMS, where he found Hermione alone in the common room. She had pulled a chair up to the window and was holding a large book in her lap as she looked out across the grounds.

"Hermione?" he said, his voice just above a whisper.

She turned to him, her eyes slightly glazed over. "Oh, Harry, I didn't hear you come in. Did the rest of tryouts go well?"

He nodded and crossed the room to her chair, where he knelt next to her. "It was fine. We have some really excellent players this year. What were you reading?"

"I'm still trying to translate the parchment and the journal. I just... I just can't seem to grasp it. There's something I'm missing, some key part. I've taken language lessons before, but they were taught and broken down into sections. This is just so...so completely foreign." She was frowning, a crease between her brow as she looked down at the large book in front of her. He recognised it as one of the ancient History books that Rachel had given him. The parchment was spread across the page, adjacent to another piece of parchment with Hermione's scribbling over it.

"What have you got so far?"

"Well, I tried looking for patterns, repeat words. When I sounded out the words, I found a rhyme pattern, even though that doesn't mean it will translate into a rhyme. For some reason, the only word I was able to translate was three."

"Three?" he asked.

She nodded and picked up the parchment, pointing at a line. "See that word?" he nodded. "It appears several times," she pointed out the repetition. As he was translating it, it just...made sense. Three. There it was. The word three. But that's all he was able to understand." Frowning

again, she closed the parchment and her notes inside the book. "I think I need a break from this for a bit."

He moved behind her chair and gently rubbed her shoulders. "That's not a horrible idea. Don't worry though, you'll figure it out."

"You really think so?"

"I know so," he leaned down and kissed her gently.

"I'm starving," she admitted.

"Mmm, maybe skipping dinner wasn't such a good idea," he replied, grinning.

"Oh, no. I think the time was well used. Doesn't change that I'm hungry now, however."

"Well, how about we go down to the kitchens and see what the house elves will give up."

"Oh, alright," she agreed after slight hesitation.

Grinning, he pulled her out of the chair and wrapped his arms around her.

"You smell good," she said as she buried her head in his chest.

"I thought you liked how I smelled after Quidditch."

She pulled a face. "I'm positive I never said that."

"Oh... well..."

She grinned and tickled him. "Food..."

"Alright, Ms Granger, I shall lead you to the kitchens."

"Alright, Mr Potter."

He pulled her hand up to his lips and kissed her fingers as she led the way out of the room, feeling safe and content for the first time in weeks.



## Chapter Ten: Hidden

**False face must hide what the false heart doth know. - William Shakespeare**

Harry pulled his Quidditch cords on, anxious to get out to the pitch. After tryouts, McGonagall hadn't allowed any practices for over a month and there was to be a Quidditch match this weekend, Halloween. They had met with the team several times, working out various plays for the matches, but Harry and Katie were both anxious to put them into practice. The team members all got on well and Harry took that as a good sign.

As he yanked the robes over his head, he heard the door to the dorm slam and as the cloth slid past his eyes, he saw Ron standing there, glaring at him.

"Quidditch practice?" Ron said, his voice nearly a growl.

Harry nodded. "Ron..."

"Harry, don't. I thought you wanted to stay best friends, but no. You're always with Hermione or Padma now."

"I do, Ron. I didn't select you for the team because, well, because there were better players. That doesn't mean I hate you."

"Friends stick together, Harry."

Harry stared at his redheaded roommate, the anger beginning to surge through him. "Oh? They do Ron? You're sure?"

Ron turned to look at him, his eyebrow raised.

"And I suppose you're just the expert on how to be a wonderful friend, eh?" Harry blinked, surprised at his own words.

"What are you trying to imply, Potter?"

Harry set his jaw. "I'm not trying to imply anything. I'm saying that you haven't exactly been the greatest friend 100 percent of the time we've known each other. You've ignored me for much less, so this really shouldn't surprise me. It is just Quidditch."

"Just Quidditch?" Ron shouted, his voice echoing off of the walls in the dorm. "It's not just Quidditch, Harry, it's everything. You're captain and you don't even pick your best friend for the team. You're a super wizard, or whatever, and I get left in the dust. And of course, the icing on the cake, you happen to fall in love with the only girl I've ever wanted."

Harry tried to push back the guilt that was quickly resurfacing.

Hermione had been furious for Harry not putting Ron on the squad and she'd stayed angry for two days. She had been very vocal that it didn't matter what was good for the team, they were still best friends. He'd still felt guilty, but he knew he'd make the right decision. He wasn't the

only one on the team and the others deserved what was best. That meant that Ginny was Keeper. After over a month of the silent treatment from Ron, Harry began to get over his guilt, knowing that if Ron had been in his shoes, Ron probably would have done the same thing. Sighing, his anger diminishing quickly, Harry looked at his old friend.

"If you had been in my position, you'd have done the same. You know that it's not about you and I, it's about the team. I'm sorry, Ron, that it's not different, but I'm not going to pick you for the squad because you're my best friend. I wouldn't pick Hermione for the squad because she can't fly to save her life, even if she is my girlfriend. As for all the other stuff, I don't know what to say, because that's out of my control."

Ron's looked less angry and sadder. "I know," he said, his voice quiet. He set down the book he'd been holding and walked from the room, leaving Harry to puzzle over what would happen next. He sat on the bed for a few moments, shaking his head, before looking at his watch and seeing that he needed to be at the pitch shortly.

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They'd only been out ten minutes before it began to rain. Harry hovered high above the game, casting spells on his glasses and broom to keep dry. He had been distracted for most of practice, unable to erase the look on Ron's face from his mind. Katie had noticed his distraction rather quickly and had sent him to watch the team play from above. The reserves were doing everything to block the plans of the main squad and Harry was pleased to see the main squad was doing well, playing together strongly as well as holding off the other team. The rain was getting worse as the sky darkened and Harry knew they'd have to head in soon, but he knew Katie wanted to stretch practice as long as possible. It was Wednesday and the game was Saturday morning.

He watched as Ginny caught another score attempt and tossed it quickly to Ian, who dashed off towards the other end of the pitch, a reserve chaser close behind him. The team's movements were quick and decisive and Harry was impressed with how well they all worked together. As he watched, a large lightening bolt flashed through the sky, illuminating the field below him. He glanced into the stands, noticing a dark figure seated there. Harry knit his brows and he aimed his broom downwards, Katie having called everyone down. He glanced again at the dark figure, wondering who it was and why he was watching the practice.

He landed shortly after the other players and they rushed quickly through the storm towards the changing rooms. Once they were inside the warm rooms, the mysterious figure at the pitch faded from his memory and he stood with Katie to face their squad.

"Today's practice was brilliant," Katie said cheerfully. "I'm amazed at how quickly you came together out there. I realise we've been spending a lot of time on the theory of it, but I was amazed at the practice. We're going to do brilliantly against Ravenclaw this match."

"What time is the match?" asked Beatrice.

"After lunch, but McGonagall has given us use of the pitch in the morning, so there will, of course be a quick practice after breakfast. I'm going to use that time to go through our

strategies once more before the match," Harry replied.

"Are there any other questions?" Katie asked.

Each member of the team shook his or her heads.

"Alright then. I want you all to eat well this week, lots of carbohydrates and get plenty of sleep as well. Make sure you cast drying charms on yourselves once you get back to the castle, I won't have a team sick with fever on Saturday. Now, head to the showers."

The showers in the team rooms had been made available now, so everyone quickly went to shower and change into regular clothing. Harry washed up quickly, anxious to get back and be with Hermione. She had been spending every evening for the past fortnight in a corner of the common room, mumbling phrases to herself in Mage. He had tried to help, but he too could not figure out the key to it.

When he exited the shower, he saw Ginny standing near a bench, combing her hair and singing softly to herself. He recognised the tune, though the words were unfamiliar.

"Gin? What is that?"

"A lullaby my mother used to sing to me. I'm not sure what it's called."

"That's not English," he ventured.

"No, it's not. It's French," she said matter-of-factly.

"I didn't know you spoke French."

"I don't, technically. I just... know it," she replied, shrugging. "Most wizards have the ability to know a language, at least partially, without any lessons. You just have to *know* you know it."

"What do you mean, know it?"

"Well, you just do. You just know it, in your heart, mind, wherever. It's a part of you. Most humans have great language capabilities. Even some muggles can pick up languages fairly easily because they just know how they work. The ins and outs of it are just there, in their minds."

"You're serious?"

"Of course I am. They just don't know it." She smiled at him as she fiddled around with her robes and turned to him. "Go on without me, I'll be fine."

"Sure?"

She nodded. "I need a bit of time to myself anyhow. This sharing rooms bit is getting tired, quickly."

Harry mentally agreed with her as he turned towards the door. "See you later, then."

"See you."

He exited the changing rooms, surprised that the storm had blown over. He took a deep breath of the chilly, damp air, enjoying the refreshment that washed over him. He started towards the castle, moving swiftly. As he passed the edge of the changing rooms, he thought he saw a movement, but he was too intent on getting to Hermione to investigate.

When he was several metres away, he thought he heard a strange noise and turned back, seeing Ginny exiting the changing rooms. She had not wanted him to wait, so he kept moving, keeping his head turned so that he could see her. She turned at the corner of the building and disappeared.

His heart skipped a beat as a strange feeling overcame him. He pulled his wand from the pocket of his robes and moved slowly towards the end of the building where she'd disappeared. He reached the wall and turned his back to it, edging around when he heard two voices.

"I missed you," one of the voices said softly. He waited for the response, but none came. Feeling suddenly as if he was intruding upon something very private, he moved away as quickly as possible and resumed his path back to the castle.

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Hermione was in her usual corner, her head bent over the table, staring at the ancient parchment. He paused a moment, watching her in the dim torchlight of the room. She had two candles on the table, creating a soft glow over her book. Tracing over her features, he noticed how much older she looked than the day they had met on the train. Her hair had settled, becoming less frizzy, but no less curly. The curls were soft corkscrews and her hair had grown much longer. The features of her face had become more defined, losing the roundness of childhood as she'd grown up. He'd never taken a moment to really look at her, but she looked much older.

She wasn't classically beautiful, but there was something about her that made her noticeable. Perhaps it was the look in her eyes, but he couldn't be sure because he knew her too well. She was the centre of his attentions most of the time, but this was the first good look he'd enjoyed in a long time.

Remembering Ginny's words, he moved closer to her and she looked up, her eyes looking tired and defeated.

"I'll never figure this out. It's hopeless. I just don't know."

"But Hermione, you do."

She looked at him, her eyebrows knitting together. "What do you mean? I don't know this."

"Hermione," he said, putting his hands on her shoulders and looking into her eyes. "You do know this. You *know* this. It's a part of you. Just...look at it. And know that you know it."

She remained puzzled but seemed willing to just give him the benefit of the doubt. She turned her attention to the paper and Harry saw her eyes focus into that familiar concentration he'd seen countless times before. He pulled a chair up to the table and sat opposite her.

She had moved, her head resting on her hand with her hair cascading down the side and onto the table. He watched her, the entire scene looking oddly familiar to him. He watched her, her eyes moving swiftly across the page and he had to stop himself smiling as her eyes began to slowly light up in that way he'd seen countless times. She sat up, looking shocked, and grabbed a quill.

Quickly, she began scribbling across a blank piece of parchment, taking no notice of the straightness of her lines or the neatness of her penmanship. She wrote for several long moments, her eyes switching quickly between the ancient parchment and the one she was writing on. When she finished, she raised her eyes to him.

"Oh Harry." Her words were low and surprised. "Oh, how did you know?"

"It doesn't matter, what does it say?"

"I'm not even sure--"

"No, you know what it says. What does it say?"

She grasped the freshly written upon parchment in her hands and cleared her throat.

"Four powers, equal.  
Unique in strengths.

"Omniscience,  
Immortality,  
Ultimate Control,  
Strongest Power.

"One today,  
One tomorrow,  
One constant,  
One forever.

"Once unified,  
They will part,

"The three must trust  
A trio of generation new.

"Three guards shall fail

In the protection of that  
Which is their right and duty.

"Soul and Mind, forever together,  
Mind and Heart, never truly agree,  
Heart and Soul, a deepest kinship,  
shall always be one.

"Starry night, after strewn across the ages,  
the Four, separate only by body,  
Held together by magic tie,  
Shall once again unite.

"From creation born destruction  
And a fiery end of days.

"Destroy thy Darkest evil  
And rebuild the people's knight."

They stared at each other, wearing twin expressions of confusion, amazement, and fear.

"But what does that mean?" Harry asked finally.

"I have no idea."

He took the paper and ran his eyes over the words, memorising them. His attention was distracted when he heard the door to the common room slam.

Ginny stood there, looking started to see them. Her hair was soaking wet, dripping down her face and robes. She nodded to them before rushing towards her dorm room.

Harry turned to look at Hermione, the parchment in his hand momentarily forgotten. She did not look at all alarmed.

"She's been coming in late for weeks. I'm not sure how she hasn't been caught or what exactly she's doing."

"So you've never asked where she goes?"

"Of course not. It's her business and she assured us she's safe."

Harry debated internally whether or not to tell her about what he'd seen by the changing rooms before remembering what had happened last time he'd withheld information. Knowing that he didn't want to see that particular facial expression again, he cleared his throat. "I saw her."

"You did? Where?"

"Out by the changing rooms. She was with someone, but I don't know who."

"What were they doing?"

His cheeks tinged slightly. "I'm not sure."

Hermione smiled slightly, almost knowingly before taking the parchment from him. "We should show this to my parents. They might understand it." She looked at him oddly. "How did you know?"

"Ginny. She was singing in French and we started talking about languages and she said that most witches and wizards have the ability to just know a language, at least partially. I figured, you're half-magus, you would undoubtedly be able to do that."

Hermione shook her head, looking amazed. "It's hard to believe that was all that was needed. Although, I do suppose it was the simplest answer, considering that even though we didn't know what we were saying, we were able to speak Mage."

"Is the diary in Mage?" Harry asked, looking up at Hermione.

She nodded. "Although, I think that we've solved this...prophecy, it's time to turn all of this over to the adults. We should have done that in the first place, I know."

"I'm surprised you didn't turn it over to them last year," he replied, grinning.

"Mmm, well, maybe you're rubbing off on me," she was looking down at the parchment again, only giving him partial attention. He watched her scribble a few notes on the paper. "I wonder if the four refers to the Keys?" she asked, absentmindedly, almost to herself.

Harry looked at her for a few moments before standing up and walking to her side of the table. "Hermione, you've made a gigantic step today. Maybe it's time to take a break," he said quietly, peering down at her.

She tilted her head up to look at him and smiled softly. "You're right, I know," she sighed, "But I just want to solve it."

"I know love. How about we turn in for the night?"

"We?"

"Can I stay in your room tonight?"

For the first time in entire time they'd been sleeping together, she looked uncomfortable. "You haven't been in my room since...since..."

He nodded, understanding, but already beginning to feel his body responding to the memory of that afternoon. There had been many kisses and shared moments since then, but they'd never gone quite as far as they had then. He leaned down and kissed her. "I'll see you tomorrow morning, Hermione."

She just nodded her head slightly, looking sorrowful. "Goodnight, Harry. I love you."

"Love you too," he answered before walking towards his dorm.

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Jay looked down at Harry. "This," he said as he slammed a large crate down on the table, "is for tonight."

Harry looked at the large wooden box, wondering what was inside it. Jay was only nineteen years old and the only non-student teenager staying inside IMS. "Um?" was all he was able to manage as the blonde boy looked at him.

"It's Firewhiskey."

Harry's eyes widened. "For tonight? After the feast?"

"I'm expecting you'll share with the others, of course. After all, the little ones will be off doing Halloween-type things, and then they'll stay with their parents. The IMS rooms are yours for the night, as I'm leaving for Salem soon."

Harry cracked open the lid, looking at the bottles of amber liquid. "Do we just...you know...drink it?"

"You can mix it with stuff."

"Like what?"

Jay shrugged. "Like Muggle Coca-Cola. Or just water."

"Oh," Harry looked at the bottles again. "Do you have Coke?"

Jay grinned. "I have one bottle. I thought that girlfriend of yours might know how to make more."

Harry shook his head. "I doubt that. She's not exactly a fan of alcohol, so I doubt she'll help us consume it."

"Ah well. You'll work something out. The more you have, the less worried you'll be about what you're mixing it with. Have fun tonight." He nodded to Harry before turning and leaving the room.

Harry looked down once more at the Firewhiskey, wondering if anyone would actually drink the supposedly volatile drink. He levitated the heavy crate into his dorm and locked the door before heading to the Great Hall. He walked quickly, wondering how many people were actually going to be there. He knew many people were having parties with other families and many of the younger witches and wizards had apparated to the States for an annual Halloween party in Salem. He'd heard Fred and George talk about the party on a handful of occasions.



They had planned to go after they turned twenty-one.

There were smaller, clustered tables in the brilliantly decorated Great Hall. Harry had talked with the other House prefects on several occasions and they had all mentioned that many of the House rivalries between Gryffindor and Slytherin had settled. There was still a rivalry, of course, but the bitter meanness between the two houses had practically vanished. He had been surprised at this, but one of the Seventh Year Slytherin Prefects had merely said, "We aren't all on the Dark side. Just because our blood is only wizarding doesn't mean that we don't know people that aren't purebloods." As a testament to that, he saw that many of the students, regardless of House, were clustered together; they seemed more to be divided up by year. He saw Hermione and the other IMS students closer to the front and he wound his way through the other tables to take a seat next to Hermione.

She grinned at him, showing off a set of fake vampire teeth, dripping with strawberry flavoured 'blood'.

"Charming!" he said, laughing at the look on her face as she struggled to close her mouth over the plastic teeth.

The table was cluttered with dishes full of different sweets, both wizarding and muggle. He saw mini Cadbury chocolates, which had been his favourite growing up. The Dursleys had never allowed Harry to go Trick-or-Treating, but he would usually take a handful of chocolate bars from the bowl they kept by the front door when no one was looking and sneak off to eat them in his tiny cupboard bedroom.

There were also all types of food and plenty of pumpkin pie. He filled his plate with mashed potatoes, chicken and vegetables before Hermione cut him a slice of the pumpkin pie she was indulging in. They all talked cheerfully as they ate, everyone temporarily forgetting the precarious situation that faced them and the severity of what the wizarding world was facing.

When they had settled some, Harry motioned for them to listen. "Jay talked to me earlier. He thought we might like to have an after-party tonight since all of the kids would most likely be with their parents tonight. He-um, well... He gave me a crate of Ogden's Firewhiskey."

Draco and Ron both seemed impressed by this, but the girls didn't seem to see the importance of this.

"And?" Ginny said, looking oddly at Harry.

"He gave it to us so we could, you know, drink it."

"Isn't that supposed to be really terrible though?" Padma asked.

"Are we allowed to mix it with anything?" Cadence said.

"What would we mix it with?" implored Akilah.

"Women," Harry heard Ron say to Draco, who looked as if, for once, he agreed.

"I don't know if it's a good idea to be drinking tonight. Some of you have Quidditch tomorrow," Hermione mentioned, looking just as unimpressed as the other girls.

"We'll be fine. There are plenty of sobriety spells," Draco said, not looking up from the book he'd brought to dinner.

Hermione just shrugged and the girls resumed their discussion about certain former Hogwarts Quidditch players. Harry looked to Ron and Draco. Draco was still reading, but Ron was looking at him with an unreadable look on his face. He locked gazes with Harry for a short moment before turning his eyes to stare at his plate.

The crowd of people in the Great Hall began to slowly disperse and the IMS students moved as a group back to their common room.

Draco, Ron, and Harry, their animosity forgotten for one night, went to their dorm to get the Firewhiskey, while Padma and Hermione went to get more people from Gryffindor. When they returned to the Common Room, Ginny was standing in the middle of the room casting silencing charms as Hermione ushered in several Gryffindors.

Before long, several bottles had been consumed, which provided for a very entertaining evening. Harry had been surprised that the whiskey went down much easier when mixed with the Coke Jay had left for them. Ginny had quickly figured out how to make more Coke and had many others began to drink it down quickly. Not long after his third drink, he was beginning to feel the effects of the alcohol. He was slightly lightheaded and very warm as he searched for Hermione.

She was sitting in a high-backed chair by the fire, staring into a cup full of water and whiskey, which she was swirling slowly with her hand.

"Mione?"

"Hullo!" she said, a little louder than normal.

"Are you alright?" he asked, sitting at her feet and taking the drink from her.

"Hey! Thas..thas..mine."

"How many have you had?"

She looked down at her hand and slowly counted out four fingers.

"Four! Hermione...are you ok?"

She slid down her chair and into his lap. "This is all very scary you know."

He nodded, not exactly sure what she was talking about.

"I mean, heresa the thing. I like you. No, wait. I love you. And I love you a lot. Like I said. And I want to be with you, but not like, just today. I want to be with you a lot longer than

that."

"Hermione..."

"No, no, let me finish."

"Okay."

"So, like I said before, I want to be with you 'til longer than say, next month, and my mother always told me that when you love someone, words can hardly show how much. And you know, I was thinking that someday, maybe even soon, that someday I want to show you how much I love you."

"Mione..."

"Harry, shut it. I'm talking here and you're doing a piss poor job of listening."

"Sorry."

"Ok, so here's the thing. I want to show you how much I love you right now. But I'm scared to. I'm scared because I don't know how you feel and because I don't know if I'm ready and because I don't know how you feel."

"I love you Hermione. Very, very much. And I want to be with you too...a lot longer than next month." He looked down at her, wanting to kiss her and hold her, but knowing that she probably had other things she wanted to say.

"Really?" She was playing with his fingers now as she looked up at him.

"Really, Hermione."

She pulled herself up and looped her arms around his neck. "Harry, can I show you now?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'll show you." She stood, wobbling slightly and tugged on his arm. "Come on." He stood and wrapped his arm around her, supporting her as she stumbled along, moving towards their dorm. He looked around the room, surveying the damage only a few hours and some whiskey had done. Cadence was the only person that hadn't drunk herself silly and she'd escorted the Gryffindors back to the tower. Seamus, Dean, Neville, and Parvati had joined their party and they'd been led back to Gryffindor giggling and carrying on, with Cadence trying to keep them quiet. Ginny was slumped in the corner on a large, over-stuffed chair and oddly enough, Draco was keeping her company. Ron had disappeared with Padma, arguing that he could definitely out-play her in chess. The other IMS students were strewn in various places, looking as if the alcohol had actually thrown them there. He counted the figures and knew that Padma and Ron were in his dorm and also that Hermione's dorm was empty.

She pulled him towards her dorm, slamming the door shut behind them. "Whoopsie," she mumbled as she began putting various locking charms on the door. He watched her waving

her wand about, wondering how exactly she was able to perform these spells. After she had put about four charms on the door, she walked him over to her bed.

"Hermione?"

"I don't want to sleep with you, Harry. Not yet."

"Then what?"

"I want a night for us Harry. I want you to stay in here with me."

"Hermione, it used to be that I could sleep in the same bed with you and I never thought about actually being with you, at least not much. I was able to push it out of my head."

"You mean, you wanted to be with me before?"

"Yes, I was fifteen. I'm sixteen now. Those feelings haven't exactly subsided."

"They haven't?"

"No. They probably won't for a very long time. When I'm lying there, next to you, and you're in my arms, I want you. I want you a lot and I'm not sure how to handle that."

She looked confused as he said this. "Does that mean you don't want to be here tonight?"

"No. It means that I want to be here tonight more than anything, but that I just, I really want you."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

She paused.

"Will you stay anyhow?"

Admittedly, he hated the effect alcohol seemed to have on her. She seemed so spacey and out of touch with everything and he couldn't even begin to comprehend the conversation he was having with her. He groaned to himself. "You know I want to."

"Then why *don't* you?"

"Because I can't take advantage of you Hermione. I'm thinking about a lot more right now than just laying next to you."

"Oh. But I want you in here. That's not taking advantage of me."

He sighed, wondering where his Hermione had gone. "Hermione. I want to sleep with you. That is why it is living hell for me to just have to lay there. I want to hold you, I do. But there

are other things I want to do too."

She smiled at him. "You know, it's nice living with two other girls sometimes."

He looked at her, confused. "What do you mean?"

"Because we talk about things."

"Like what?"

"Boys."

This was so unlike Hermione that his head was spinning.

"See, Padma's mother owns her this magazine for teenage girls, J17. I read it. There are other ways to...you know."

He stared wide-eyed at Hermione. "To tell you the truth, Mione, I'm shocked we're having this conversation."

She giggled. "Why?" She moved back some and her hands immediately went to the waist of Harry's trousers as she leaned up to kiss him sloppily. He turned his head away and watched her small hands fumble with his belt for a moment before he jumped back.

"Hermione!"

"What?" She looked at him innocently.

He looked at her for a few moments, before pulling out his wand from his pocket. "You're going to hate me..." She tilted her head to the side, looking at him oddly. He whispered the incantation that Jay had told him about and tapped his wand on the top of her head. Her eyes slid closed and she slumped a bit before opening her eyes again and looking at him. She seemed confused before her eyes widened.

"Oh, Harry. Please don't tell me that I actually said any of those things."

He looked sheepish.

She buried her head in her hands. "I'm so mortified."

He moved closer to her and pulled her into his arms. "It's okay, Hermione. You just had a wee bit too much to drink is all."

"Don't ever let me drink again."

"Oh, believe me, there won't be any alcohol near you for a very long time."

"I take it, then, that you won't be in here tonight?"

"No. I'm going to head to my own bed soon, but can I ask you a question first?"

"Of course."

"Why?"

"Why was I drinking?"

"Yeah."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I think it was just with how stressful everything has been. I wanted to do something different, try something else."

He hugged her again and she leaned up to kiss him. "I'll see you in the morning, okay?"

She nodded and hugged him once more. "Goodnight. I love you."

"I love you too."

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They had agreed to take the journal and Prophecy to Dumbledore's office as quickly as possible and Saturday morning had been their first chance. They gave the password to the gargoyle and were admitted onto the stairwell.

Dumbledore ushered them into his office almost immediately, almost as if he knew there was something they needed to speak with him about.

"Professor Dumbledore," Hermione began, as soon as they all were seated. "Last year, Harry found a diary. I began translating it because parts of it were in Latin, but suddenly, the language changed and the translating spell I had been using wouldn't work. Once we began to learn about Mage, I suspected that's what it was. I've been trying to learn Mage--"

"What do you mean, learn it? It's a dead language and there's no possible--"

"Professor Dumbledore, I know it sounds unbelievable, but please."

He merely nodded and waited for her to continue.

"I used Harry's Pensieve. Listened over and over again. And then...last night, I just knew."

Dumbledore nodded as this apparently made great sense to him.

"I translated the Prophecy last night, and I think it'd be better now if I turned everything over to you. Perhaps Ami would be best to help me, as she knows a great deal about magi."

"You will assist her, though, Miss Granger?"

Hermione nodded.

"May I see this prophecy?"

Harry pulled the folded parchment from his pocket and handed it to Dumbledore. The old wizard read it over quickly before looking at his students. "I will see that this gets to Ami, as well as Richard, who will no doubt be able to help as well. Ami will get in touch with you on the diary. As for this," he asked, holding up the sheet, "is this the parchment that she's been struggling with for months?"

Harry and Hermione both nodded.

"Very well. Is there anything else?"

They shook their heads and stood ready to leave. Hermione nodded once to Professor Dumbledore before exiting the room. Harry, however, remained, looking at his headmaster.

"Professor Dumbledore?"

"There are times, Harry, when you feel as if everything going on around you is only a narrow view of a much broader scope."

"You think, then, that the Prophecy, the Keys, Connelly, they're all connected?"

Dumbledore looked at Harry solemnly. "I can only guess, Harry, whether or not they are."

"And your guess?"

"We are dealing with something much more powerful and much deeper running than we originally thought."

Harry knew that it was time to leave, but he looked once more at Dumbledore.

"Good luck, today, Harry." A soft smile accompanied his words and Harry was momentarily settled in his belief that everything would turn out as it should.

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Hermione looked at Harry from her perch on his desk as he straightened his Quidditch robes. "Why do you change in here?"

"I always have. I feel more comfortable for some reason. There've always been too many girls in the changing rooms."

"Why is Katie here, anyway?"

"Each team has one former student. They were all seventh years last year. Pretty much every house had to rebuild a team, so the older player is there to help, as well as to keep an eye out

for anything dangerous happening at the matches."

"That makes sense, I suppose. Isn't Dumbledore worried that the older players will have an advantage?"

"I suppose not, as each time has an older player, it doesn't really make a difference. It's not like he brought Oliver Wood back or something."

"Oh, now that would be nice."

"Hermione. Boyfriend. In room."

She grinned at him. "I know." She hopped off the desk and walked over to him. "You look very handsome in your Quidditch robes. Have I ever told you that?"

He smiled and kissed her gently. "Thank you."

"Are you all set then?" she asked as she stepped back to take a look at him.

"I guess so."

"Excellent. Shall I walk with you down to the pitch then?"

He nodded and offered her his hand, which she gently took.

The walk down to the pitch was relatively quiet as they huddled close against the cold November air.

There was a small crowd gathering at the pitch already, but Harry noticed that none of the muggleborn witches and wizards were out among the group. He saw Professor McGonagall standing with Madam Hooch and he walked over to her.

"Mr Potter," she nodded her head as she saw him walking towards her.

"Professor McGonagall, where is everyone?" he asked as he looked around.

"The visitors to the castle are staying inside today. Professor Dumbledore has worked out a way for them to view today's match."

"Then who are all these people?" he pointed at the growing crowds.

"Ministry officials, visitors from Diagon Alley. League Quidditch in Britain has been suspended, there aren't enough players. Many are here viewing the game."

Harry only nodded. "Right then, I'm off to the changing rooms." He quickly kissed Hermione's cheek, who blushed, and jogged towards the rooms where his squad were waiting.

They were seated on benches in a semi-circle, looking nervous. Katie was standing in front of them, wand in hand and drawing complicated diagrams on a board and imitating some of the



American football coaches he used to see on television. He walked to her and placed a hand on her arm.

"I think it's best if maybe we just give them a pep-talk rather than lecturing tactics."

She looked at him, surprised, before nodding and taking a seat. He stood before the squad and watched them for a moment. All five of his new players were acting differently, though it was apparent they were all nervous. He sighed and sat down in front of them.

"It's just a game," he said softly. "There's nothing riding on this, nothing to worry about. You're a strong team with a great deal of talent. And remember, have fun."

His words obviously did nothing to ease their tension and they all stared at him blankly.

"Right then. Katie, do you have anything to say?"

She shrugged and shook her head.

"Okay, then I guess we should head out to the pitch," said Harry, dejected. He felt a bit disheartened that his team hadn't had a better reaction to his talk, but he resigned himself to the fact that he wasn't the greatest spirit rouser.

A loud cheer erupted from the crowd when the team entered the pitch. Harry looked around and saw many Gryffindor banners, mixed in with a fair share of Ravenclaw. It seemed that a great deal of people had turned out for the match, adding to crowd of students present. The Ravenclaw team was waiting, hovering just above the ground on their broomsticks. The Gryffindor team hurried out and quickly mounted their brooms. Madam Hooch stepped onto the pitch and set the large box containing the various balls for the game onto the ground. She placed the silver whistle to her lips and a shrill sound echoed throughout the stadium as she kicked the box open and the bludgers and Snitch flew out. With one arm, she tossed the Quaffle into the air and the game was on.

Harry kept his eye trained on the Snitch for the few seconds it hung in the air before disappearing. His eyes roamed the pitch, keeping an eye out for the tiny, glimmering ball and also watching Cho, who was circling on the other side of the pitch. The wintry wind was whipping through his hair and he was already beginning to shiver some against the cold. He pulled his robes closer around him and whispered a warming charm. It didn't do much to take off the chill, but it helped a bit. He let his eyes wander down towards the crowds and he could pick out Hermione, who was sitting with some of the other girls from IMS. He saw Ron and Draco sitting together, a few rows behind the girls and he nearly toppled off his broom, wondering when they had become mates.

Turning his eyes back to the game, he saw Ginny block a brilliant try by one of the Ravenclaw Chasers before she tossed the Quaffle over to Katie, who took off at a racing speed toward the other goal posts. She was flanked by the other chasers, who were doing their best to block the bludgers flying towards them. When she had a clear shot, she easily threw the Quaffle through the golden hoop and the crowd let out a loud cheer as Dean Thomas' voice rang over the stadium, announcing the first score of the game.

The Ravenclaw Chaser once again had the Quaffle, but Beatrice and Gertrude were quickly on them, aiming bludgers towards the lone player. As she ducked away from one of the bludgers, she dropped the Quaffle and Ian quickly snatched it, once again making a beeline for the posts. As Harry watched him, he caught a faint glimmer hovering near the end of Ginny's broom. He looked at Cho, who was still circling a good distance away. He narrowed his eyes and began the swift descent towards the Snitch. As he neared closer, a movement on the other end of the pitch caught his attention. He looked towards a large black mass moving out onto the pitch and heard a whistle blow from the direction Madam Hooch. Every player turned to look at the group of figures moving quickly.

"Hermione Granger, please step forward onto the pitch," a loud voice said, ringing out for every person to hear.

Stony silence settled over the stadium as Harry watched Hermione step down and make her way slowly onto the field. He was too far to clearly make out the expression on her face and for some reason, he didn't dare push his broom closer. She was standing in front of who he assumed was the person that had spoken. He heard a vague incantation and suddenly she was kneeling on the ground, her arms bound behind her back.

"As ordered by the Ministry of Magic, I do hereby arrest thee, Hermione Granger, for Improper Use of Magic to the severest degree."

Shouts and gasps echoed from the crowd as the dark figure pulled Hermione to her feet and began pulling her off the pitch. Harry, no longer caring about the consequences, pushed his broom swiftly towards the ground. The group had moved off the pitch and was now swiftly making its way towards the castle as he hopped off the broom a few feet over the pitch and tumbled to the ground. He rolled and jumped to his feet before taking off at a dead run towards the group. Others were following behind him and he heard many people calling out his name. He didn't look back, focusing instead on the black robed group in front of him. The anger within him boiled as he charged forward, ignoring whatever people were calling out behind him. His effort was fruitless, they were moving too quickly. Knowing that he would undoubtedly be breaking several rules, he stopped and squinted his eyes shut.

He was standing in the Entrance Hall now and Dumbledore was looking at him. Wordlessly, the wizard turned towards the doors, where he watched the procession moving towards him. Harry choked back a cry as he saw Hermione floating before them, her head flopping dangerously to the side. Quickly, he pushed past Dumbledore and out onto the lawn. Dumbledore followed and they met the group halfway up the path to the entrance of Hogwarts.

"Headmaster Dumbledore." Harry now recognised the voice of Lucius Malfoy, who was holding Hermione in mid-air with his wand.

"How may I help you, Mister Malfoy?" Dumbledore's tone was icy and still as he looked at the blonde wizard standing only a few metres away.

"Hermione Granger is wanted by the Ministry of Magic."

"For what?"

"For disobeying the Muggleborn Laws and the special rules for Hogwarts by using magic outside, for using magic to further her own studies, for abusing her powers as a half-Magus for Apparition, and for speaking out against the Ministry of Magic during a recent class time."

Harry's mouth dropped open in shock as he recalled Hermione's diatribe last week during a class when a ruling had been passed down from the Ministry that it was no longer *advisable* to speak ill against the wizarding government. She had launched a class discussion drawing lines between Nazi Germany and their current state of affairs, of which only a few of their classmates had truly understood.

"And how do you know of this?"

"We have witnesses from her class, willing to testify."

"Who?" Dumbledore's tone was edging along dangerous.

"I will not tell you that, Headmaster. At her trial, you may find out who."

"Her trial?" Dumbledore implored, his eyes narrow slits as he looked at Malfoy.

"Yes, the Minister of Magic himself has set her trial date for December Twenty-sixth. Until then, she will be held at the Ministry."

"No, she will not."

"I daresay, Professor Dumbledore, that you cannot go against the Minister of Magic."

"Should the Minister of Magic decide that he is going to arrest and hold one of my students, let him know that it would be advisable for him to come and speak directly to me." He pulled his wand from the sleeve of his robes and held it menacingly out in front of him.

Malfoy stared at Dumbledore, his jaw set in a sneer. "Fine." He flicked his wand and Hermione's limp body fell to the ground. Harry dashed to her, ignoring the words of Dumbledore and pulled Hermione to him.

He held her head, watching as her eyelids fluttered. She peered at Harry briefly before her eyes rolled back and her body went limp again. He looked up at Malfoy, gritting his teeth. "What did you do to her?"

"What does it matter?" With a swoosh of his cloak, Malfoy and his men marched quickly down the hill towards the gates. Just as they had moved away, the crowd from the pitch arrived. Ginny and Ron were leading the group and they stopped dead, staring at the three people on the Hogwarts lawn. Ginny looked at Harry, tears flowing freely down her face. She bent next to him and looked at Hermione, fresh sobs racking her body.

"This is all my fault."

## **Chapter Eleven - Rocks**

### **Call on God, but row away from the rocks. - Indian Proverb**

Approaching footsteps echoed loudly in the hospital wing as Harry shook himself awake. He turned towards the infirmary door and saw Dumbledore there.

"I have spoken with Miss Weasley. She would like to talk to you once you leave here."

"Did she tell you why she said what she said?"

"No, Harry. I believe that is something she wishes to tell you first."

"When will Hermione wake up?" He looked down at the girl lying in a hospital bed, her curls limp and spread out on her pillow like a halo. She was ghostly pale and her breathing was shallow. Madam Pomfrey kept popping in to check on Hermione, but she would only shake her head and mutter that there was nothing could be done.

"I'll see what I can do, but it could be awhile."

Harry looked up at Dumbledore, his expression blank. "What did he do to her?"

"When prisoners are taken to Azkaban, they are charmed into a deep sleep so that they cannot later tell how to get to the prison. Even visitors are charmed. Malfoy cast that same charm on Hermione."

"Were they going to take her to Azkaban?" Harry asked quietly as he ran his thumb over the back of Hermione's cold hand.

"No, but Lucius Malfoy is not fond of her."

"What did she ever do to him?"

"I don't believe that is something I can answer for you, Harry."

Harry sighed and leaned back in his chair, watching Hermione's chest rise and fall slowly.

"But she'll be okay, right?"

"Yes, she will. Once the charm wears off. I suggest that you return to your dorm, Harry. You need your rest and I know that Miss Weasley is waiting for you."

"When will her trial be?"

"Connelly has scheduled it for the day after Christmas."

Wordlessly, Harry nodded and stood. Dumbledore nodded to him and as Harry left, he was surprised to see Dumbledore sit next to Hermione's bed. He thought he heard Dumbledore say something, but at that moment, Madam Pomfrey returned and gave him a gentle push out the

door.

"I'll call for you if she wakes before we expect her to."

The door closed behind him and he began the long walk back to IMS.

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Seven students sat facing each other sombrely as the eighth stared into a book. Harry slammed the door shut behind him and seven heads turned to look at him, each face now blank. Ginny stood, staring at the floor. He looked at no one as he marched into his dorm and slammed that door as well.

He looked about the lounge room, the frustration coursing through him. He raised his hand towards a glass setting on the counter and stared at it. When the pieces scattered across the kitchen, he felt the boiling anger ebb slightly. He aimed for another glass, ignoring the sound of the opening door as he blew that to pieces as well. He felt a hand on his arm and he whipped around to see who had come in.

Ginny was standing a few feet behind him, her face pale.

"How is it your fault?" His tone was icier than he expected.

"I think you should sit down."

"How is it your fault?" he repeated, refusing to sit.

"Harry, please," her tone was soft and wavering as tears began to slowly slide down her face. "I didn't mean to; I didn't know. I--I thought he wouldn't tell anything."

"Who?"

"Draco," she whispered finally after taking a long moment to just look at him.

"Why would you tell Draco anything?"

"I didn't! I mean, he's around all the time. He heard what she said in class! He saw her at the match using magic!"

"When was she using magic?" he shouted.

"For one of the banners! I didn't even think there was anything wrong with it and I didn't mean to say any of the things I did to him. We used to talk about our studies and I wished I had her abilities and...I don't know, I just don't know what happened."

"Why were you even talking with him?"

"Because..." her voice shook as everything in his mind clicked.

"It was him behind the changing rooms, wasn't it?"

"Were you spying on me?"

"Answer the question, Ginny!"

"Yes, it was him."

"You mean, you're actually...with him?" Harry spat out the last part of his question.

She nodded slowly.

"For how long?"

"Only about a month."

Neither of them had heard the door close, but they did hear the noise Ron made as he stared at his sister in anger.

"How could you?" his voice was almost a growl.

"Ron," Harry said, moving between Ginny and Ron.

"How could you do that to her?! She was your friend!"

Ginny was sobbing now. "I know that! I know that! Don't you think I feel awful?"

"Sod how you feel! Do you know what you've done?!"

Harry looked between the two Weasleys, who were both bright red. Ron looked as if he was positively fuming and Ginny was weeping into her hands. He was unsure of what to say, but the silence that had taken over the room was broken as Ron stormed out. Harry and Ginny looked at each other momentarily before following Ron out into the common room.

He was standing a few feet in front of Draco, who had not yet looked up from his book.

"Malfoy." No reply. "Malfoy!"

"You're blocking my reading light, Weasley."

Harry's jaw nearly dropped to the floor as he watched his friend haul Malfoy to his feet by the collar of his robes. Ron had grown considerably in the past few months and in his anger, he appeared to tower over Draco, who did not struggle against the other boy's hold.

"Why?!" Ron shouted in Malfoy's face.

At this Draco smirked. "Why not?"

Ron pulled his arm back, but Harry was quicker. He grabbed Ron's arm and looked at his

friend.

"He's not worth it, Ron."

"Because of him, Hermione could go to jail. Because of this little rat she could spend the rest of her life there."

"She's not going to jail. Let him go."

Ron dropped the front of Draco's robes and he stumbled back, glaring icily at Ron and Harry.

"That little mudblood will get what she deserves."

He walked quickly from the room and the other students followed his path to the dorm. There was a creak as the door to IMS opened and Professor McGonagall walked in with Hermione. She looked sternly at the collected group.

"I will be moving the children housed here to a different area of this castle. Arabella and I agree that this is not a place for them to be with student behaviour being as it is."

Harry paid no mind to her words as he looked at Hermione. Her face was washed out and she was supporting herself by leaning against the doorframe. Her eyes were partially closed and he wondered why they had let her out of the hospital wing. Under McGonagall's stern glare, the group went quickly to their dorms. Harry remained, keeping a careful eye on Hermione.

"Professor Dumbledore was able to awaken Hermione. Against Madam Pomfrey's insistence, she has decided to return here. I trust that you will look after her the remainder of the night?"

Harry nodded.

"She'll be fine. She needs to rest though. That spell does terrible things to the body." Her tone was softer as she looked at Hermione. "Arabella will be in tomorrow afternoon to speak with you all. She's flown to London with Professor Snape to see if they can get more information on this arrest. Dumbledore would also like you to meet with him tomorrow morning and Hermione, if she's well."

"Thank you, Professor McGonagall."

"Goodnight, Potter." She turned towards the door before looking back at him. "She can't speak yet."

Harry looked at Hermione, who was wiping away tears from her face. She looked somewhat dazed and completely exhausted. He walked towards her as Professor McGonagall left and as soon as he was close enough, she collapsed against him, her body shaking. He pulled her closer, wrapping his arms tight around her waist as she rested her head against him. After a few minutes of just standing there he pulled back to look at her. She was still crying, although silently now. His heart broke as he looked into her eyes; he'd never seen so much sadness. Her lips opened and he placed a finger to them, shaking his head. They turned their heads towards the dorm they shared as a door opened. Padma and Ginny emerged, carrying duvets and

pillows.

"We thought Hermione might like to have the room to herself. Draco has locked himself in your dorm, Harry, and Ron is stewing on the sofa," said Padma, noting Harry and Hermione's curious looks.

She looked at Hermione for a moment longer before she turned to Harry. "Is she going to be all right?"

Harry nodded. "Dumbledore and McGonagall both think she'll be fine."

Ginny and Padma had dropped their bedding on the sofas in the common room and they walked over to where Harry and Hermione stood. Hermione leaned against Harry still, her weight mostly on him. Ginny looked solemnly at Hermione.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. Hermione's eyes closed as she reached out a hand to her friend. Ginny took the offered palm and Harry watched them for a moment. Hermione just shook her head and Ginny began to cry again. Padma hugged Hermione gently and turned to Harry before hugging him too.

"You know, as this has all happened, it seems so much like a plot to screw as much up as possible. Things settle down some, only to worsen a great deal."

Harry just looked at his newfound friend as she pulled back. "I wish that I was able to understand it all," he replied quietly, nearly forgetting that Hermione and Ginny were standing with them.

"Whenever anything was wrong in our family, something which felt out of our control, my mother used to say to us 'call on God, but row away from the rocks.' Remember Harry, that no matter how much you wish for something, if you do not try and help yourself, you are only bringing yourself closer to trouble."

With a slight bow of her head, Harry knew that Padma would not speak further on what had happened, but her words made sense to him. He turned and led Hermione back to her dorm.

She seemed very out of it as she took her pyjamas to the en suite to change. When she re-entered the room, she barely acknowledged him as she climbed into her bed.

"Hermione?"

"Hm?"

"Will you be alright?"

She turned her head on the pillow and looked at him, pleadingly. "Please don't go Harry."

He could see her eyes beginning to rim with tears and he quickly climbed into her bed. Instantly, she was moving towards him and he felt her warmth as their arms circled around each other. Her head was resting against him, face buried in his chest and he felt her hot tears



beginning to seep through his cotton t-shirt. He held for a few minutes as she cried silently.

In the past few months, he had seen her cry more than he had in the years he'd known her. She usually wasn't one to cry, but the events happening in their world now affected her more closely than the others ever had. He thought of her parents. He wasn't sure if her grandparents were muggles or wizards, but he was fairly certain they weren't. The injustice of it all began to flood his mind as he turned over the past few months in his head. He was seething, both because of the injustice of it all and because he knew that he couldn't stop Hermione's tears. In that moment, he felt helpless, feeling her body tremble against him and waiting for her to make some sort of sound. As he looked down at her, he saw the years of things that happened between them. How she'd been trapped in a bathroom with a troll because he and Ron were so terrible to her, her petrification, the events in the Shrieking Shack... all those times when she'd saved him and Ron. The guilt washed over him in waves as he realised how difficult he'd made their lives, how it was probably his fault that she had been arrested. If it weren't for him, she would never have been in the public eye so much.

He felt her trembling subside and her breathing grew heavy as she finally fell asleep. He looked at her longer, and saw that even in her sleep, she appeared to have no solace. Her face was twitching and she seemed troubled. He watched her, tears running silently down his face until sleep eventually overtook him.

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It was a rare occasion that Harry felt comfortable in Dumbledore's office. This was no such occasion. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair several times as Dumbledore peered over his spectacles at them.

"I've been in contact with the Ministry and there is no chance of moving up the trial date." He finally spoke and his words deadpanned in the room. Harry had woken that morning, hoping that the previous day had been a nightmare.

"What's going to happen at the trial?" Hermione asked, her voice dry and shaking. Dumbledore paused, unsure of how to reply. He sighed faintly before answering. "The trials at the Ministry are held downstairs, in a dungeon-like room. You will most likely be strapped to a chair, where a judge will ask you several questions. Witnesses will be called and afterwards, a jury will make a decision."

"Who's going to be called?"

"Well, we're allowed to call so many people to defend you. Most likely, the primary witness for the Ministry will be Draco Malfoy."

Hermione's mouth dropped. "Draco?" she replied, after a long pause.

"Yes. It was Mr. Malfoy who issued a formal complaint."

Hermione looked completely shocked. "Draco? Draco?"

Harry reached over and placed a hand on Hermione's shoulder. She looked at him.

"But he saved us..." she trailed off looking mortified.

"Ms Granger," Professor Dumbledore's voice was solid and serious.

She looked at him, her chin quivering slightly. "Yes?"

"Regardless of Mr. Malfoy's past actions, he did make the complaint."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure. There are several possibilities."

"Such as?"

"I think, Ms Granger, that we will have to wait and see."

"What are we going to do?" Harry asked.

"We're going to prepare a defence and go to trial."

Harry peered at Hermione once Dumbledore said this, expecting that she would be crying once more, but she had a determined look in her eyes. He concentrated on her eyes and he could practically see her mind working.

"We'll win," she said suddenly, breaking the tense silence in the room. Dumbledore looked at her, his face giving away nothing.

"Ms Granger," he said, more as a statement than as a question.

"I believe in justice Professor Dumbledore. I believe that the truth will be found out; that I am not a muggleborn."

"Hermione, we cannot bring forth your parents. It puts too many people in danger. There are others in hiding just like they are."

"But--"

"We will prepare a defence based on that the fact that you have stayed within the legal limits of practising magic as a muggleborn."

When she had made her proclamation that they would win, that justice would be done, Harry had seen a fierce light in her eyes. It was not foreign to him, he'd seen it before when she had decided that the house-elves should be given rights. He had seen it before when they had been presented with particularly difficult assignments. When she had helped him with the second task, the light had been there. And now, it was gone. Her face resumed its previous look of fear and doubt and his heart sunk into his stomach as he saw the hopeless look in her eyes. He felt empty--guilty--as he watched her look at Dumbledore, hoping there was something he

could do.

Suddenly, as he looked at his headmaster, Harry felt a rage boil up inside him. He'd never known Dumbledore to not have the answer. In past years, it was always Dumbledore who had the most influence, who was able to prevent things like this. He turned to face the old professor, a look of fury on his face.

"Harry?" Dumbledore asked finally, more than likely noticing the look.

"Isn't there something you can do? Some way to stop this, the arrest, the trial, even Connelly's power? How can this really be happening? How can you let it?"

"Do you recall, Harry, at the end of your fourth year, that I said we are only as strong as we are united?"

Harry nodded, his anger ebbing slightly.

"Connelly has succeeded in dividing the wizarding world. I have compared this situation to that of Nazi Germany, as it is very similar, but there are a great many differences. This is by no means a new stereotype. For centuries, there has been a feeling within the wizarding community that muggles should not know about this. There is constant questioning over why we are the ones that must remain hidden when it is we that yield the most power. Many may not understand the reasoning for keeping our world hidden from muggle eyes, but they cannot deny its necessity."

"But why now? Why so extreme?" He was beginning to feel weary as Dumbledore gazed levelly at him.

"There is a time when change becomes necessary Harry. We have waited for years for change. You may not believe this is the best way to let it happen. I most certainly do not. I do, however, feel that it will not last long. I cannot tell you the outcome of these events. I cannot change the course of history. What will happen, will happen. We have set forth on a path of change and it will not be easy. I have prepared the people on our side the best I can and there are many in our world that support our work. Those that side with Connelly are few and far between, but they are powerful."

Hermione looked at Dumbledore. "If there are so many people willing to aid us, why can't we stop this?"

"When laws are created purposely to stabilise the many, it becomes much more difficult to affect the changes in our society."

Harry felt his heart sink again. Dumbledore had always had the answers; he'd always seemed to be the one in control. Sitting in his office, hearing his words, Harry suddenly felt lost, as if he'd been walking in the woods, knowing the sure way home, but had suddenly lost his compass. He turned his gaze downward, away from the Headmaster, and stared at the palms of his hands. He traced the intricate lines there, wondering what would happen next and feeling completely powerless to stop it.

"Arabella is meeting with your classmates this afternoon but, Hermione, your parents would like to meet with you." Dumbledore's words fell like bricks in the silent room. Harry and Hermione both stood, nodding at Dumbledore as he showed them from his office.

Harry forgot the way to Hermione's parents' quarters, but she seemed to know it by heart. They walked briskly, holding hands as Hermione trembled slightly. Before long, they were seated on a long sofa, across from Hermione's parents.

He had never seen Rachel looked so pale. Her eyes were dull, with none of the usual, intelligent sparkle that resided there. She had dark circles under her eyes and looked almost frail, wrapped in a too-large cardigan sweater. Harry saw blue veins under the milky skin at her temples, overshadowed slightly by graying hairs. She looked as if she'd aged years in the few weeks since he'd seen her last.

They were silent for a few minutes before Rick cleared his throat. "Dumbledore says that every member of the Order is going to help you. There are going to be many people willing to testify for you, willing to tell the court what a good person you are."

Rachel gave a short sob. "Hermione..." Tears were now running down her face slowly.

He looked at Hermione, who appeared as if she was trying not to cry. He watched her lip quiver for a few moments before her face crumpled and she rushed to her mother. They threw their arms around each other, crying and talking and crying more.

Hermione pulled back and looked at Rachel, who wiped the back of her hand under her eyes. "I feel like it's all my fault, love. If we'd been braver, if we'd raised you as we should have..."

Hermione shook her head. "It's not, don't think that. Please, Mum. Don't."

Harry shifted his glance towards Rick, who seemed growingly uncomfortable with the situation. He looked at his wife and daughter a few moments longer before moving closer and wrapping his arms around both of them.

"We want to help you Hermione, in any way we can," he said finally, pulling back to look at his daughter.

"I can't let you. It's too dangerous."

"I don't care. I can't--we can't--let anything happen to you. It's our fault that things are this way," he replied.

"Dad. Mum. No. I can't let you do anything. I have to do this on my own."

Rachel sighed shakily,; her hands were trembling as she moved them to cup Hermione's face between them. "You are far braver than I ever could be." She trailed her thumbs under Hermione's eyes, wiping away the fresh tears.

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The halls of Hogwarts were eerily silent as they walked to IMS. There were classes in session and occasionally a voice would drift out, but the classes themselves were not the cause of the silence. It was not abnormal to walk through the halls, hearing the sounds from the paintings or the movement of ghosts, but those regular, everyday sounds were gone. Harry felt as if were summer again in the all but empty castle.

The silence pervaded the castle, even to the IMS classroom, where their eight classmates were sitting silently. Arabella was sitting at the desk, looking at paperwork. Harry and Hermione took their seats as she looked up.

"Excellent, you're here. We can begin." She turned towards the chalkboard and wrote the word magic on the board. "Mr Malfoy, can you tell me what this word means to you?"

Draco looked bored at being in the classroom and seemed to ignore Arabella's question.

"Mr Malfoy, regardless of whether or not you deem this an important question, you are a member of this program and you will answer it."

He cocked an eyebrow at her, still not speaking.

"Mr. Malfoy..." Arabella's tone was icy and daring. Harry could tell she was seething. "Hermione," she barked, "what does this mean to you?"

Harry saw her shift uncomfortably in her seat. "It's power...the ability to stretch physical limits." Hermione sounded unsure of herself as she said this and Harry was beginning to grow more and more uncomfortable.

"No."

"No?" Hermione answered.

"Magic is not power. It is responsibility. In our world, we see Dark Arts as an irresponsible use of power. We see the necessity to hide our powers from muggles because to do so would be to open up a world of trouble. Magic is a simple fix for many problems and with that comes the responsibility to see the danger in it."

"Then why do we let muggles into our world?" Draco spoke up, staring at Arabella.

"To allow muggleborn children to run around without any control over their magical ability is ludicrous."

"You say it is a responsibility. It is also a gift. A gift that should be given only to those who deserve it."

Arabella slammed her hand down on the table. "Mr. Malfoy, this classroom is not a place to voice your personal opinion."

"I can say whatever I want."

Harry was shocked. He had never heard Draco speak like this to a teacher. He was normally reserved in class, listening and taking notes as Arabella spoke.

"Bollocks. If you think that this is just an open forum where you can spout your stereotypical load of crap, you can leave."

Draco looked at her coolly before standing up and making his way out of the classroom. Harry turned his head from the door to Arabella, who was calmly moving back to her desk. He looked again at the door before moving his seat back with a loud screech and storming from the classroom.

Draco was halfway across the IMS common room, heading for the entrance hall.

"Malfoy!" Harry shouted, surprised at his own voice. Withdrawing his wand from his pocket at the other boy stopped, he waited for Draco to turn around.

"What?" Draco's voice was dripping venom, his cold, gray eyes narrowed menacingly.

"What's the matter with you?"

"What on earth are you babbling on about, Potter? Why did you follow me? To have a nice little heart to heart talk about our feelings? Stuff that. I don't have to answer to you."

"You are. What was that about in there?"

"That was about this teachers and this school and how everyone here thinks they're right all the time."

"How could you turn her in? She trusted you."

"Then she's not as smart as you all think." Draco turned then, his robes flaring out behind him as he walked briskly away.

Harry bristled and followed after Draco, his wand still at the ready. He called Malfoy's name again, but the boy did not turn around. Harry did not know where he was heading, but for some reason, he refused to let Draco out of his site until he found out why he had reported Hermione.

As they reached the staircases heading to the second floor, Draco stopped abruptly and turned to face Harry.

"Full of courage and pride, but not a brain cell to share between the entire house."

"Shut it, Malfoy. I'm not leaving here until you give me an answer."

"An answer to what?"

"Why did you do it?"

"Why? *Why?* Fine, I'll tell you why." His stare was dark as he paused. "Your girlfriend is a filthy little mudblood. She doesn't deserve the attention she gets. Her magic is tainted; tainted by muggle blood. She is not worthy of any of this. And neither are you."

The words stood before Harry, almost as a dare. Willing him to defend Hermione and himself. He thought of his mother, of the possible situations she had faced at the height of Voldemort's power. He thought of all the other people, just like Draco, who thought that magic from muggleborns was tainted and that people not of pureblood were undeserving. Fury raged through him as he looked at the cold smirk on Draco's face. Without thinking, he raised his wand, no hex in mind.

The power ripped through Harry's wand and he nearly dropped his wand as a burst of black light shot from the end of it. The light hit Draco in the chest, sending him backwards against the hard, stone steps. He heard a sickening crack and dropped his wand, staring straight ahead.

## **Chapter Twelve - Anticipation**

**If pleasures are greatest in anticipation, just remember that this is also true of trouble. -**  
Elbert Hubbard

Harry jumped as a light tapping came at the window above his bed. He looked up, startled by the sudden noise. An owl was silhouetted against the darkening sky and he moved quickly to allow it entry to his room. A great gust of wind followed it, blowing the papers around on his desk. He ran back to his desk, frantically grabbing at the pieces of parchment fluttering about. He looked at the owl, which was standing on the corner of the desk, a thick, rolled parchment in its claws. It gave a soft hoot and Harry shook his head, realising what it wanted. He grabbed his wand from his bedside table and performed the identification charm upon the parchment. It glowed green and dropped from the owl's claws. Its task completed, the owl flew out the open window into the chilly winter afternoon. He closed the window tightly and checked to see if Hermione had woken at all. She was still curled under the covers of his bed, the top comforter pulled up just under her chin. He walked to the desk and unrolled the parchment.

"**GRANGER TRIAL TOMORROW**" read the top headline. He sighed and set the parchment roll down, knowing that he'd read it later. He looked over at his desk. His neatly ordered research on time travel was now strewn over its surface and the floor. It would be another late night of working after he served his detention. He ran his fingers through his hair, trying to decide what to do. He still had to go down to the dungeons to help Professor Snape with some gross task or another. The detentions he served with the various Hogwarts professors ranged from almost enjoyable to downright disgusting. He had learned a great deal over the past month during his detentions and was thankful that was the only long-term punishment the school had given him. He had been suspended from attending classes until after Christmas and had been confined to the IMS common room. He had missed the first snowfall and watched from the windows as his friends joined in various snowball fights out on the lawn. It had been a meek punishment for his actions, this much he knew.

Of course, Draco Malfoy was healed quickly by Madame Pomfrey after Harry had thrown

him back against the stone steps. A crowd had gathered quickly around them as many had heard the shouting in the hall. Professors McGonagall and Sinistra had stopped the bleeding from Malfoy's head and Sinistra had levitated him to the hospital wing. Professor McGonagall's face had been grave as she'd escorted him to Professor Dumbledore's office. He had stood, shaking, in front of the Headmaster's desk as Dumbledore spoke to Lucius Malfoy over the fireplace. Draco's father had been furious, shouting through the popping flames that he would have Harry brought up on assault charges and that he would be arriving at Hogwarts in a matter of hours to collect his son. Harry had sat in Dumbledore's silent office waiting for him to arrive.

Dumbledore did not even look at him as he went about his daily work. After what felt like years of waiting, a small charm lit on Dumbledore's desk and Harry heard the stone staircase begin to move. He held his breath until Lucius Malfoy stormed into the office, brandishing a long, black cane as his midnight cloak swished around him.

"Dumbledore!" he had shouted at the top of his lungs. "How can you allow such insolence to happen at this school?!"

Harry had never seen Lucius so violently enraged before. His tone was usually even, although menacing. This time, his eyes were wild with fury as Dumbledore stared evenly at him.

"You may take your son. Draco has been suspended until the end of term for fighting."

"You cannot suspend him!"

"As far as you are concerned, Mr Malfoy, you have no say in the matter. You are no longer a Governor of this school."

"And what about Potter here?" Lucius Malfoy was seething. The redness of his face extended into the pale blond hairline and if the situation had not been so dire, Harry would have laughed.

"Harry has been suspended as well and will also be serving detention until the end of summer term."

"I'll see you at the trial," Malfoy had growled. He had turned swiftly, the cloaks billowing again. Harry could hear his shoes smacking against the stone staircase for his entire descent.

He'd turned to look at Dumbledore, who merely nodded to him.

"You do understand, Harry, the severity of what you have done?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you also understand that it is very hard for me to punish you, knowing what Draco has done?"

He had been shocked at Dumbledore's words when he said them, and now, several weeks later in his own dorm room, they still surprised him. The general reactions of the teachers had been



all but non-existent. It didn't seem to bother many of them that Harry had fought with Draco. He had dreaded his first detention with Snape, expecting that the man would hex him to next Christmas, but his potions professor had surprised him. He had been silent about Harry's punishment and occasionally engaged him in cordial conversation.

He pulled himself out of his thoughts and began gathering the papers together. Arabella was still giving him research and after a few weeks, Dumbledore had given him permission to go to the library. Draco was still out of school and Harry suspected that he was probably not getting assignments from Arabella. He checked his watch and realised he was due in the dungeons in ten minutes. He quickly shuffled the papers to the side of his desk and placed a locking charm over the owl-delivered parchment.

He pulled his robes on and grabbed the dragon-hide gloves that were usually required for his work before kissing Hermione's forehead and heading towards the dungeon. The walk to the dungeons wasn't very solemn. Most students had stayed at Hogwarts over the Christmas holiday and the families and younger children staying in the castle were walking about, intermingled with the regular students. He was awakened early that morning with Hermione, Ginny, Padma and Ron to celebrate Christmas with the children that they had continued teaching. Harry had been sad when the young ones were taken from IMS, but he understood the reasoning. After his fight with Draco, he had been ashamed to teach them, knowing that what he had done was a terrible model for their behaviour. Hermione had eventually persuaded him to continue helping with the classes, as they were already short one person, and the students had been thrilled to have him back. The severity of the incident with Draco seemed lost on them and he'd found the lessons to be a much needed break from all the work Arabella had been assigning him.

He checked his watch again and quickened his pace. It had been the busiest Christmas Day he'd had in ages. After the morning in the family quarters, they had returned to IMS for a gift exchange of their own. Harry had then set about work on research for Arabella and Hermione had fallen asleep as he worked. After his detention, there was to be the usual Christmas Feast, followed by a meeting with Dumbledore and the rest of the Order. He knew it was probably better that it be an early night, but he also knew there was still much planning to be done for the trial tomorrow. He sighed. They had very little in Hermione's defence without knowing fully the charges brought against her. Snape had spoken to many of his contacts and the overall impression they received was that Hermione was to be used as an example, both for the muggleborns and for those pureblood wizards still in doubt of the Muggleborn Laws. After word of Hermione's trial had spread the far reaches of Wizarding Britain, owls had begun to pour in, offering assistance, advice and support. From there, Dumbledore and the Order had the information they needed about what sort of opposition there was within the pureblood wizarding community.

Snape had made weekly reports that had been sent to the Order Operatives and his numbers had been scary. There were growing amounts of people willing to help Connelly's side. Groups of wizards and witches had begun sprouting up across the country and they were the unofficial police of Connelly's government. They were mostly young wizards, just out of school and suffering under the current economy because of lack of available jobs. Many of the wizards had been forced to work in the Muggle community, something that many were furious about.

There was a growing resistance, however. The parchment he had received earlier was a small communication from other parts of Wizarding Britain. Each week, he received this small newsletter-type correspondence that included the status of the resistance in different parts of the country. Many people received them, he knew. It had quickly become an underground newspaper, which showed a great deal of promise for their side. In the South, near London, the resistance was large. Fights had frequently broken out in the street between muggleborns and pureblood wizards or between purebloods and the Death Eaters that were being used as Connelly's army. The instigators of the fights or rather, the side that was against Connelly's government, were not sent to Azkaban, but to another prison, located somewhere near Manchester. It was newly erected, Harry knew, designed solely for those that had broken the Muggleborn Laws or any of the other lesser charges brought forth by the government.

He had reached Snape's dungeon as he'd mulled over his thoughts and was surprised to find the Potions Master seated at his desk with a few scarce parchments scattered about him. Normally, there would be a large barrel positioned next to one of the tables with beetles that needed tended to or a large stack of used cauldrons that needed to be washed. However, the room was sparkling clean. He looked oddly at Professor Snape who had only just noticed him.

"Is there something I can help you with Potter?"

"Detention, sir."

"Are you offering?" Snape's look did not change, but Harry was surprised at the humour in his tone.

"Sir?"

"It's Christmas, Potter. Go back to your dorm."

"Alright. Are you coming to the meeting tonight?"

Snape nodded. He was not officially a member of the Order, but he was one of many operatives that assisted in their various missions. His contacts within the ranks of the Death Eaters had proved invaluable countless times. The others that helped were mostly teachers, but they had helped quell the problems that arose between muggleborn and pureblood students. He had seen several fights in the hallways and had heard the word 'mudblood' on more than one occasion. Initially, he'd been upset with McGonagall and Arabella's decision to remove the younger children from IMS, but after the behaviour of many students, ones that weren't even in IMS, he'd been glad they had been removed from the tumultuous setting of the school.

"I'll see you at dinner," Snape said, his tone now solemn.

Harry was not looking forward to the Feast tonight, especially with the knowledge of what was happening tomorrow. He nodded and turned to head back to IMS.

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Hermione was sitting cross-legged on his bed, her own copy of the delivered parchment in her hands. IMS common room was completely quiet; he guessed that many of the students had gone back to their own houses to spend the day.

"Hey," she said, without looking up, as he walked in the room.

"Is there anything interesting in there?" he asked, nodding at the parchment. "I haven't looked through it yet."

"Just the trial, for the most part. There was a huge brawl at a pub in Leeds on Monday, but that's about all."

He watched her for a few moments, searching for some sort of reaction about the trial. She had become mostly silent about the fact that it was even happening and she seemed almost resigned to the inevitable. He knew that tonight was going to be difficult. They were finalising her defence. "How are you doing, Hermione?" he asked quietly.

She looked up at him, as if judging what exactly he meant by his question. She sighed after a few moments and shook her head. "I honestly don't know. I don't know what to expect or what to feel. It seems so..." she trailed off for a few moments, "surreal," she said finally. "I just--just can't believe it's even happening."

He went over to her and sat down as she wrapped her arms around his waist, snuggling against his chest. He kissed the top of her head, holding her close and sighed at the feeling of holding her. Their contact had been limited over the past few weeks, due to the amount of work he had and general feelings of awkwardness. Her tears had stopped flowing quickly, but she seemed closed off to everyone, even him. Often, she didn't return to their dorm until after eleven o'clock at night, long past the time the library closed.

"I've missed you," she said, after ten minutes of silence.

He smiled and hugged her tighter. "I've missed you too."

She pulled away from him and smiled. "So, no detention this afternoon?"

He shook his head.

"Can you spare a bit of time to go outside? There's a huge snowball fight out there."

"I'm not sure--"

"Ah, no one will say anything. Your suspension is practically over and you were only confined here during term. Please." Her eyes were begging him as she clasped her hands against her chest.

He laughed. "Alright. I guess I can spare some time."

She grinned and flung her arms around his neck. "Oh, Harry. Wonderful. Let me go get my robes and things. I'll meet you in a few minutes."

She practically ran from his room and he was surprised to see her so excited about going outside. He knew, however, that she hadn't been leaving the castle to go out either. He pulled his heavy winter robes from the wardrobe, charming them for extra warmth, and grabbed his gloves and scarf. Hermione was waiting for him, a stocking hat pulled over her curly hair, causing it to stick out at odd angles. She looked undeniably cute standing there, all dressed to play in the snow and he couldn't help but pull her into a huge hug.

There were countless students on the grounds, all laughing and throwing snow balls at one another. Ron and Ginny had helped construct a large snow-fort, very much in the style of the twins, and were surrounded by a bunch of younger students, all of them waging war against a group of Gryffindors. There were students from all the houses out, but there was a definite division between them that went beyond house lines. There were Gryffindors mixed with Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, but he also noticed that there were a few students from each house mixed in with the Slytherins. Over the past weeks, his assumptions about the culture of the wizarding world had been largely shaken. Many pureblood families didn't mix with the Death Eaters, that much was certain, but they still held some grudges of those with muggle blood. He saw now that these grudges passed down the generations and he felt a wave of sadness wash over him, wondering if it would ever change.

His thoughts were interrupted as a large snowball smashed into his shoulder, spraying snow over his face and glasses. He sputtered, looking to see where it had come from. Ginny was standing on top of their snow fort, a mischievous look on her face. Her wand was held out, charming the snow in front of her into a dozen snowballs.

He ducked as they sailed towards him and he heard Hermione laughing as he bent close to the ground. The others involved in the snow battle were all laughing as Ginny grinned down at him. He looked up at her, laughing and shaking his head. He waved his hand over the ground, causing a few snowballs to jump in the air, and sent them flying in her direction. This seemed to signal an all-out war and soon, others joined in. Some were using magic to make snowballs and others were merely packing them with their hands and heaving them at whoever was closest. There were no sides and every person was on his or her own. Hermione was standing behind the fortress, packing snow tightly before flinging it out onto the other students. Harry was in the middle of the battlefield, aiming primarily for Ron, who was sending snowballs back at him.

He was laughing as they all fought, enjoying the freedom to be young. For the first time in probably two or three years, he felt young. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hermione sneaking towards them, a snowball raised high over her head. She was aiming for Ron, who was being distracted greatly by Padma raining a shower of loose snow on him. Padma must have noticed Hermione approaching because she giggled and stopped the falling snow. Ron looked at her oddly for a moment for turning his head, just as Hermione threw the snowball at him.

The snowball hit Ron right on the forehead and he stumbled a bit, looking stunned. He blinked several times and reached a wet glove up to wipe his face. Hermione stood, frozen, her snowball obviously landing off-target. Padma was looking at Ron, wide-eyed and Harry waited to see what his reaction would be. He realised he was holding his breath when Ron looked evenly at Hermione, white snow glistening in his hair.

"Well, now, that wasn't very lady-like."

Hermione seemed to sigh before she began laughing. Harry let out his breath and joined her. He could see Ron shaking with held-in laughter and Padma was just shaking her head at the three of them. Harry walked over towards Hermione and put his arm around her, laughing as she clutched her stomach, her cheeks rosy. Ron shook his head at the pair of them and walked over. Harry didn't see him scoop up some snow but he gasped as Ron plopped a large snowball on his head, hitting Hermione as well. Harry gasped as the icy snow slid down his collar and against his back.

Hermione's eyes were wide before she grinned. "That's war, Ronald Weasley."

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They trudged inside forty-five minutes later, laughing at one another as they pounded their feet on the stone stairs, attempting to take off some of the snow. Hermione's curls were tangled and wet and Harry's hair was even messier than usual. Hermione peeled her gloves off and intertwined her fingers with Harry's. He grinned at her, squeezing her fingers. Ron and Padma were walking ahead of them, chattering away about nothing in particular. Hermione's skin was glowing and she looked genuinely happy for the first time in months. When they stood at the door to IMS, he pulled her into a tight hug and kissed her soundly.

"I love you, Hermione Granger. Merry Christmas."

A large grin broke out on her face before she replied, "I love you too. And Merry Christmas."

They linked arms and walked into the common room, which was bright with a large fire burning in the hearth. A tall Christmas tree flanked the stone fireplace, ornamented by projects the young students had done. Everyone else had just come inside and there were scarves, gloves and boots piled by the fire, drying off. Harry dropped his things onto the ledge and headed towards his room, knowing that Hermione was following him.

He immediately walked to his desk, knowing that he should read the paper delivered earlier but not wanting to spoil his mood. Hermione closed the door behind her and scrambled up onto his bed, carrying a towel in her arms. She began drying her hair with it and looked at him, smiling.

"Are you looking forward to the Feast tonight? So many people have stayed on for the holidays."

He nodded slowly and sat in bed next to her. "I just hope that it stays festive. I'm not looking forward to the meeting tonight, at all."

Hermione grimaced. "I wish it didn't have to be so soon after Christmas. I feel so unprepared. I--"

He held a finger against her lips. "Let's enjoy this while we can. There's plenty of time to

worry later."

She sighed and nodded. "You're right."

Harry jumped off his bed and walked towards his wardrobe. He opened one of the doors and pulled open the top drawer.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked from the bed.

"I have your Christmas present."

"Do you think we could do presents later tonight? Maybe it will make the mood lighter after the meeting. "

He nodded and closed the door, disappointed that he couldn't give her the gift he'd been waiting to give her since he'd had Ami take care of it in November. Hermione smiled at him briefly before standing up and crossing the room to slide her arms around his shoulders. He wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her close to him and breathing in the smell of her hair, shampoo mingled with the damp smell of snow. He kissed the top of her head.

"We should get ready for the feast. I feel chilled to the bone," she said, her voice muffled by his shoulder.

He released her, nodding. "I'll meet you in half an hour, alright?"

She smiled and nodded, standing on her tip toes to kiss him gently on the lips.

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Harry drew in a deep breath as he entered the Great Hall. The teachers seemed to have done a little extra this year, perhaps to take minds off of current events. The Hall was done up in a style that Harry had seen in old Christmas movies his aunt liked to watch. Near the head table, two monstrous Christmas trees stood in two corners of the room. They were decorated in strings of popcorn and cranberries. There were large poinsettias dotting the trees and flickering candles floating just on the branches. As was the usual fair, a gentle snow was falling near the roof and garland stretched across the rooms, bearing small, shimmering lights. The smell of pine and cinnamon floated through the room, invading Harry's nose and making him feel immensely warm.

The four house tables remained, but as he had seen outside, the house lines were the defining element anymore. Copious amounts of students mixed in with other houses and the families staying at Hogwarts were spread amongst them. The teachers were already seated as Harry and Hermione joined the mostly Gryffindor table on the far side of the room.

The Gryffindor students were discussing an examination they'd had just before the holiday began. Harry listened intently to their conversation about schooling this year and part of him wished he'd stayed in the regular Hogwarts lessons.

Neville Longbottom was explaining to Hermione a potion they had been working on just before term ended. She interrupted him part way though and shook her head. "I just can't believe you chose to continue studying Potions. Herbology, I can understand, and even Transfiguration to an extent, but I thought you hated Potions?"

"Last year, it just began to make sense to me," was his reply. He shrugged and continued talking about the effects of wormwood mixed with snake skin.

Harry turned his head away from their conversation as he heard a soft clinking sound. Dumbledore was standing at the head table, tapping lightly on his goblet. The others in the Hall gradually quieted and turned their attention to Dumbledore.

"I would like to extend my gratitude to those of you who decided to stay at Hogwarts this year. During times like these, it amazes me to see that even in our differences, we can come together to enjoy the most simple of life's pleasures. Please, enjoy your meals and a very Happy Christmas."

Everyone in the room burst into applause, understanding the meaning behind Dumbledore's simple message. Hermione's hand was on his leg and she squeezed gently as she looked at him, smiling happily. He leaned in and kissed her gently, the need to do so completely overtaking him. The lightest pressure met his lips before she pulled away, her face pink as the Gryffindors showered them in a chorus of 'Ooohs' and 'Awws'. Harry laughed and grabbed her hand as the table filled with food. He looked at the giant roasted turkeys and hams, surrounded by potatoes and vegetables. Trays of steaming hot chipolatas and bowls of thick gravy helped to cover nearly every inch of the table. Hermione passed him a pitcher of pumpkin juice and he poured himself a goblet of the orange drink before passing it on to Ron. A large bowl of stuffing was being passed to him from one side as someone passed a platter of turkey from the other. His plate was soon full and he found his mouth was watering, eager as he was to eat.

Ron was dipping pieces of turkey into his mashed potatoes before shovelling the fork load into his mouth. He grinned at Harry, the awkwardness between them the past few months seemed to have disappeared, at least for the day. Harry spooned up some carrots after returning his friend's smile, once again surprised at his feelings of contentment despite what tomorrow held.

"What do you mean; you didn't think he screwed up?" Dean Thomas was saying loudly, cutting into Harry's thoughts.

"I don't think he didn't screw up, I just don't understand what the big deal is," Ron replied.

"He missed a bloody penalty kick!"

"But it's just football."

Dean sputtered. "How would you feel if one of your Cannons missed the winning goal?"

Ron shrugged. "I'd be angry sure, but that happened this past summer."

"We would have won the semi-finals against Germany!"

"Like I said, mate, it's just football. You ought to focus more on Quidditch."

"I would, if there was any Quidditch to be played."

Ron shrugged and went back to stuffing food in his mouth.

"I read about that in the Times," Hermione said, looking at Dean.

Dean nodded. "Bloody madness."

Hermione nodded. "I'm sure my dad was furious. He's absolutely mad about football."

"Has he seen Quidditch?" Ron burst in.

Hermione opened her mouth to reply, but seemed to think better of it and just shook her head.

"He should come to a match," Seamus said.

"He can't," Hermione replied, shaking her head.

"Oh. Yeah, that's right."

"Oy! Dean!" called Parvati from farther down the table. "Have you finished with the papers yet?"

Lavender hit Parvati on the shoulder. "Quiet, you'll get us in trouble."

"Papers?" asked Hermione curiously.

Lavender and Seamus nodded simultaneously. "We've been getting some of the muggle newspapers, trying to see if any there's anything peculiar going on," Lavender explained.

"But how?"

Lavender shrugged. "Professor McGonagall."

"Professor McGonagall?" replied Ron loudly. Harry grimaced as a few faces turned to look in their direction.

"Quiet, prat," Harry hissed.

Lavender just shook her head. "Dean asked her. She brings us three. The Times, the Guardian and the Independent."

Hermione's eyes were wide. "Do you save them?"

"I've been clipping the interesting parts and getting rid of the rest."



"Could I see them?" Hermione whispered conspiratorially.

Lavender nodded. "I'll bring them round day after next, when things have settled down."

"But tomorrow--"

"Aye, Hermione, I know what tomorrow is. Like I said, I'll bring them round day after next."

Hermione looked oddly at Lavender for a moment before looking at Harry, who shrugged.

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The room was not dark, as it normally was during their meetings. The massive table was covered with large books, pads of parchments, countless quills and several ink wells. The remains of a Christmas dinner were on a table in the corner of the room. Rick, Rachel, Ami, Arabella, and Remus were seated around the table, silently working, when Harry, Hermione and Dumbledore entered the room. They all looked up at the entering group and set their quills down, each stretching or yawning. Rachel shook her head and smiled slightly.

"How was your dinner?" She smiled, the wrinkles around her eyes deepening as she did so. She'd aged some in the past few months. He expected it was the recent events that had caused the change in her looks and noticing the difference prompted him to survey the others.

The changes in Rick Granger weren't nearly as noticeable as Harry didn't see him as much as he saw Hermione's mum. The grey in his hair had deepened considerably and he looked smaller, somehow. He was slumped in his chair, a pair of wire-rim, silver glass dangling loosely from the hand he was using to pinch the bridge of his nose. He looked tired, unshaven and weary.

Ami's normally tidy blonde hair was piled messily on the top of her head, held in place with a pair of muggle pencils. She was wearing muggle clothes; a large jumper over a pair of blue jeans that looked aged and worn but very comfortable. Arabella was dressed similarly and was stretching her arms over her head as she looked at Harry, Hermione and Dumbledore.

It was in Remus that Harry noticed the most significant change. His mind wandered to third year, when he'd first seen Lupin on the train. He remembered his tatty, but clean robes and the flecks of grey hair that dotted his head. His eyes had sparkled during lessons and he'd seemed genuinely thrilled each day to be teaching. Now, his dark eyes were dull and purplish shadows were visible under his eyes. His hair was much greyer than Harry had ever seen it and he looked older. He supposed it was to do with the hiding that he'd been doing since the previous fall, when he'd been accused in Fudge's murder. Sirius, Harry knew, had changed after that as well. They faced a grave penalty if ever caught and the chances of that happening seemed more likely as time passed on. Harry knew that much of the look in Lupin's eyes attributed to the situations facing the wizarding world.

Dumbledore spoke up suddenly, motioning Harry and Hermione to take seats. "What is the plan for tomorrow?" he asked immediately.

Rachel sighed audibly, pushing her lips out as the air passed through them. "Well, we have the list of people being questioned. We have the formal charges and we have our counters to each charge. As for what the Ministry will be presenting, I honestly have no clue. You remember how it was..." she trailed off, shaking her head and looking down at the parchment in front of her.

Dumbledore didn't say anything and turned to Remus, who shook his head. "They're calling witnesses and we have no idea what questions they'll be asked."

"Don't the witnesses get interviewed?" Hermione spoke up.

Dumbledore shook his head. "Perhaps I ought to explain how your trial will pan out Hermione. It's very different from any muggle court proceedings." He pulled out one of the chairs across from where Harry and Hermione were seated, moving aside some of the parchments and books. "If I remember correctly, a muggle trial volleys back and forth between either side. The prosecution will start, for example, by questioning a witness. Then, the defence would get to question that same witness, immediately afterward."

"How will it be tomorrow?" Hermione asked.

"Well, in the muggle world, it is pretty typical that the law is 'innocent until proven guilty'. Here, the prosecution, in this case, the Ministry of Magic will begin the trial by offering a list of the charges brought against you. They discuss various things that play into your character and your life thus far as a muggleborn witch. After they have made their case, it is up to us to prove that you are not guilty."

"Guilty until proven innocent," Hermione answered quietly.

"So what's our defence?" Harry asked.

"Well, we know the charges. We've been researching similar cases and trying to get what our odds are. Dumbledore has explained many of the events of the past few years to us. We don't know what they know."

"How is this a fair trial?" Harry asked, anger tingeing his voice.

"I don't think it's meant to be," Remus answered him. "How could you expect it to be?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I just expected better than this."

"What for?" Remus responded. "For the many amazing things magic can do, we balance it out by being completely old fashioned. This current situation is evidence of that. No matter how much we grow and change, there is always that ancient fear. That's really what this boils down to. They want the people, the jury, to be afraid of Hermione."

Dumbledore shook his head. "There will be no jury," he said solemnly.

"What?" Hermione's tone was incredulous.

"The Minister of Magic will be presiding. He alone will determine your fate."

His words fell on disbelieving ears as the door to the chamber opened. Severus Snape walked in, carrying a sheaf of parchments.

"What have you found?" Ami asked.

He tossed the parchments onto the table. "List of the witnesses and some suspected questions. They're really going all out here." Dumbledore pulled the top parchment towards him and Harry saw him frown.

"Draco Malfoy. Ronald Weasley. Harry Potter."

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Harry slammed the door to his dorm as soon as he entered. Hermione seated herself on the bed, taking deep breaths and wiping at her eyes.

"How can they do this? Don't I have to agree to testify?"

"Apparently not," Hermione said quietly.

"I don't see how any of this is fair. Are you going to be called to the witness stand? Why even have a trial? Why don't they just cart you off now?"

Hermione looked at him, tears sliding slowly down her cheeks. She didn't bother to brush them away as she shrugged at him, holding her hands out in front of her helplessly. "I don't know Harry. I don't have any idea about any of this."

He wanted to hold her and kiss her, but he was too angry to even think about touching her. "This is ridiculous Hermione."

"I know."

"How can you just shrug it aside? Why aren't you fighting?"

She looked at him, still crying before she reached up and brushed away her tears. She set her shoulders and looked at him. "I have fought many things. I have stood by your side and fought with you. I have done things which weren't exactly legal. And I don't regret one moment of it. Yes, this is unjust and yes, it is ridiculous. I will walk into that courtroom tomorrow morning with my head held high, knowing that whatever happens, I will have done the best I can. I am fighting. I have been fighting against this very thing since day one."

He looked at her, unblinking and unsure of what to say.

"What's done is done. What's coming will come. Right now, I want to get your Christmas present, lock our dorm door and snuggle in front of the fire. Is that alright by you?" She

sighed again and gave him a tiny smile.

In that instant, he knew how he'd been able to fight Voldemort. He knew what kept him alive. And for once, he understood that look in her eye, that gentle sparkle, came not from her intelligence but from her inner strength, the depths of which he knew he would never understand. That sparkle that changed so drastically was now ablaze and looking at her, Harry felt himself calming, knowing that whatever happened, she was ready.

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She stood and walked silently to her room and he crossed to his wardrobe to retrieve her gift and change into his pyjamas.

There was a small box sitting on the table in front of the sofa. Hermione walked into the room just as he did, dressed in red flannel pyjamas and carrying a pot of tea, dangling two thick mugs from her finger tips. Her long, curly hair was brushed into a thick ponytail and the traces of tears were washed from her face. She smiled at him, as if their conversation only fifteen minutes prior was now forgotten.

She nodded towards the couch and set the mugs and pot down on the table. "I added the milk and sugar already, is that alright?"

He nodded and laid the thin, blue box containing her gift down on the table. She poured him a mug of tea and pointed towards the wrapped box sitting near her knee. "You go first."

"You're sure?"

"I insist."

"But--"

"Nope. I've been working on that for far too long. You go first." She held the steaming mug of tea to her lips as she watched him pick up the box.

The paper was a dark purple, tied with a large, silver ribbon. He tugged at it gently and it slid open, falling in gentle folds on his lap. He tore back the paper to reveal a black box. Tugging the lid off and sliding away the tissue paper, he watched out of the corner of his eye as Hermione smiled softly.

Inside, nestled in white tissue paper, he saw the black leather cover of a book. He pulled it out, wondering what it was, as there was no evident title on the front. The leather was soft and the book was more flimsy than a regular text. He opened it, surprised to see thick, handmade paper bearing Hermione's careful script. He noted the date at the top. Late July. He looked at her.

"They're letters. To you. I started writing them in the summer when I was too scared to say everything I was thinking."

He was speechless. "I-I don't know what to say, Hermione."

She blushed and shook her head. "There isn't anything to say. I wanted you to see them. I know I could have gotten you something better, but it seemed like the perfect gift at the time."

He hugged her tight, the diary pressed between them. "Hermione, it is perfect. I love you."

"I love you too."

"I'm not sure if my gift is good enough," he said quietly, scratching the back of his head.

"Well, what is it?" she grinned at him, wiggling a bit on the couch so that her feet tucked underneath her.

He held the box out to her and she pulled the lid off anxiously. He loved to watch her open gifts; she seemed young and he could imagine her as a young girl, spoiled on Christmas by her parents. The look on her face was surprised as he pulled the long, silver chain from the box.

"Oh, Harry." She held the necklace in front of her eyes so that she could see the charm more closely. She stared at it a moment before shifting her eyes to look at him. "It's a ring."

He nodded, feeling proud of this gift. On an afternoon he had spent with Ami, she had mentioned something about his mother's jewellery. After some prodding on his part, she had shown it to me. Amongst the few necklaces, a bracelet or two, and a silver watch, he'd found the long box. Opening it, he found a small silver ring on a silver chain. Ami had smiled at him. It had been a gift from his father to his mother when they graduated Hogwarts. She'd worn it until her pregnancy caused her fingers to swell. The chain had been their mother's. She'd worn a locket of her two daughters hanging from it, but Ami had told him that the locket had been broken years before. He'd asked Amy if he could have it and she'd nodded, telling him she'd take it to be cleaned first.

He told Hermione all of this, repeating Ami's words to him. "They were separated after school ended. My dad was going to work for Dumbledore and my mum was spending the summer abroad, helping other operatives to secure aid from foreign communities. It was charmed; whenever the engraved ridges glowed, he was thinking about her. I--Ami taught me how to do the charm..."

She threw her arms around his neck and he felt her tears against his cheek. "Harry, it's wonderful. I love you so much." She was kissing him suddenly, frantically, planting kisses on his lips and cheeks and forehead and eyes. He allowed her to do this for a few moments before cupping her face in his hands and kissing her fully on the lips. She leaned against him more, putting her own hands at the back of his neck. He moved his hands around her waste and pulled her even closer.

Their lips began a slow kiss, gentle, tentative. She was a bit lower than him and her lips hit more on his bottom lip as their kissed deepened. She straightened herself, kissing him full on and deeper. He shivered when he felt her tongue move slowly, tracing along his bottom lip and he felt her gasp when he nibbled slightly on hers. They pushed closer together then and he

felt her breasts pressed against his chest. The heat in the room was deepening as their long kiss continued.

She was shifting, taking his hand as they kissed and pulling it towards her breast. His breath increased as he felt the weight of it in hand, the gentle slope of its curve underneath his fingertips. After a few moments, he pulled away, looking at her. Her eyes were liquid and there was a fiery intensity that he had never seen before. She seemed steeled and sure of herself. He gulped, taking in a deep breath and his voice caught in his throat.

"You're sure?"

She nodded. "I'm sure."

He stood from the sofa and offered her his hand, which she took as she stood. Together, they walked into his bedroom and she closed the door behind her.